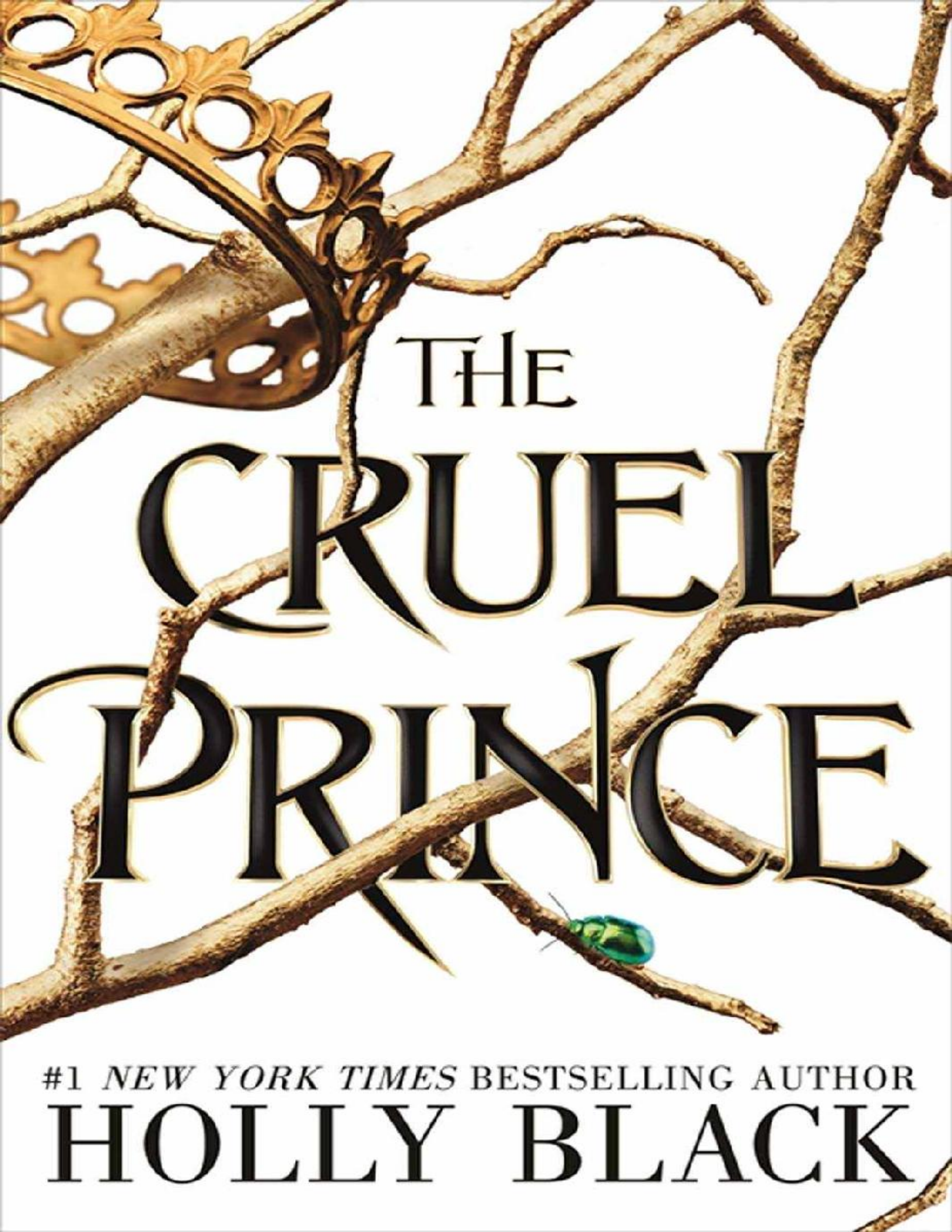


#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HOLLY BLACK

THE CRUEL PRINCE

HOLLY BLACK

Contents

Title Page
Dedication
Map

Book One
- Prologue
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20

Book Two
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25
- Chapter 26
- Chapter 27
- Chapter 28
- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30
- Epilogue

Acknowledgments
Copyright

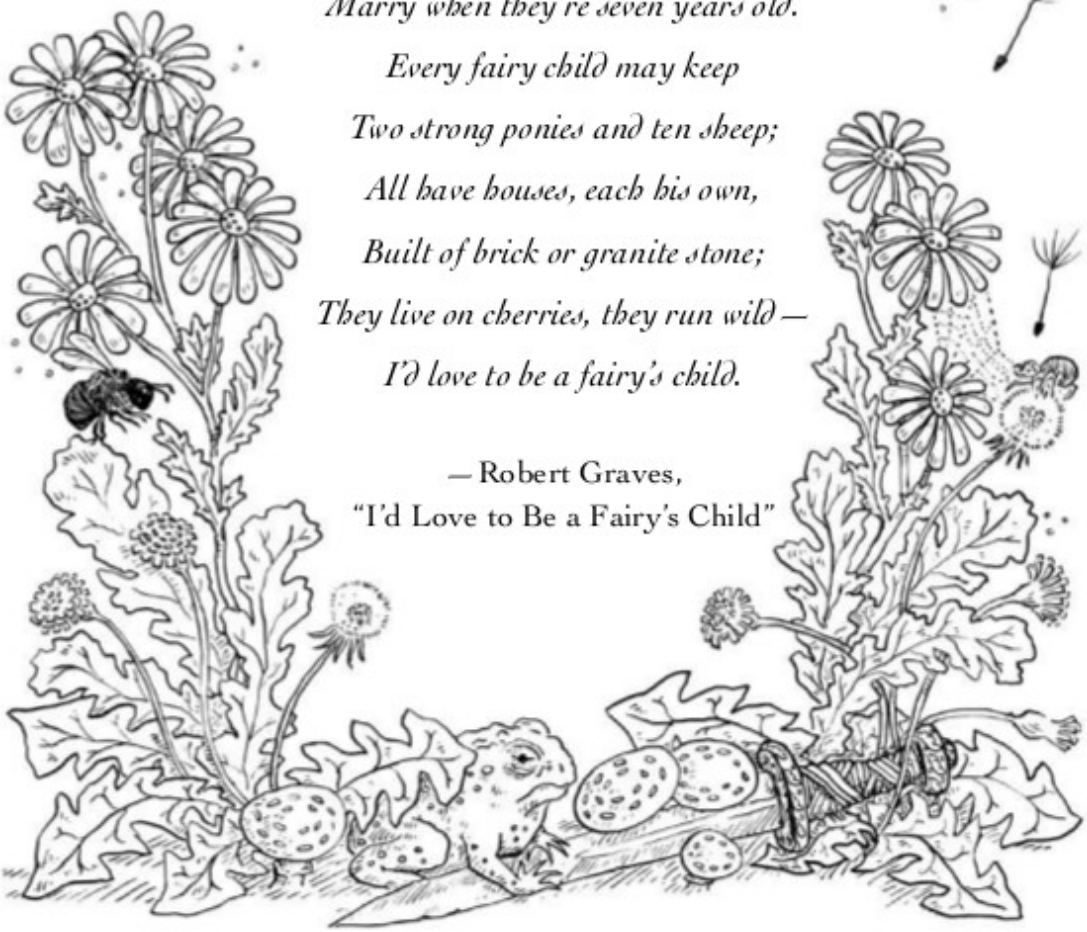
For Cassandra Clare, who was finally lured into Faerieland

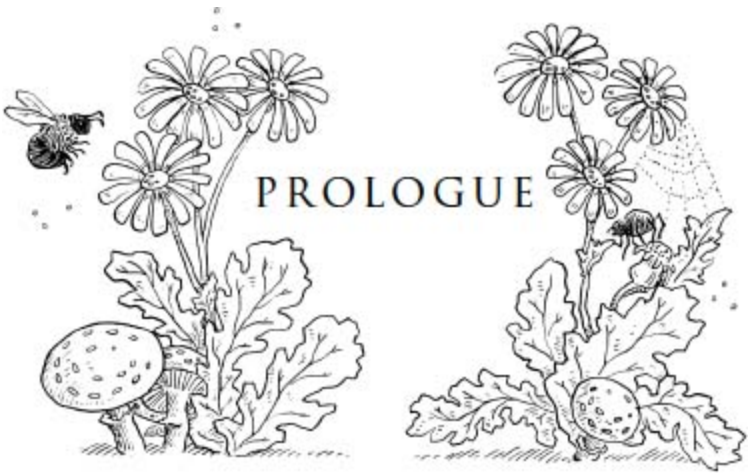
Map of the Shifting Isles of
ELFHAME
Crooked Forest
Locke's Estate
Palace of Elfhame
Tower of Forgetting
INSMOOR
INSWEAL
Milkwood
INSMIRE
Lake of Masks
Madoc's Stronghold
Hollow Hall

Book One

Children born of fairy stock
Never need for shirt or frock,
Never want for food or fire,
Always get their heart's desire:
Jingle pockets full of gold,
Marry when they're seven years old.
Every fairy child may keep
Two strong ponies and ten sheep;
All have houses, each his own,
Built of brick or granite stone;
They live on cherries, they run wild—
I'd love to be a fairy's child.

—Robert Graves,
"I'd Love to Be a Fairy's Child"





PROLOGUE

On a drowsy Sunday afternoon, a man in a long dark coat hesitated in front of a house on a tree-lined street. He hadn't parked a car, nor had he come by taxi. No neighbor had seen him strolling along the sidewalk. He simply appeared, as if stepping between one shadow and the next.

The man walked to the door and lifted his fist to knock.

Inside the house, Jude sat on the living room rug and ate fish sticks, soggy from the microwave and dragged through a sludge of ketchup. Her twin sister, Taryn, napped on the couch, curled around a blanket, thumb in her fruit-punch-stained mouth. And on the other end of the sofa, their older sister, Vivienne, stared at the television screen, her eerie, split-pupiled gaze fixed on the cartoon mouse as it ran from the cartoon cat. She laughed when it seemed as if the mouse was about to get eaten.

Vivi was different from other big sisters, but since seven-year-old Jude and Taryn were identical, with the same shaggy brown hair and heart-shaped faces, they were different, too. Vivi's eyes and the lightly furred points of her ears were, to Jude, not so much more strange than being the mirror version of another person.

And if sometimes she noticed the way the neighborhood kids avoided Vivi or the way their parents talked about her in low, worried voices, Jude

didn’t think it was anything important. Grown-ups were always worried, always whispering.

Taryn yawned and stretched, pressing her cheek against Vivi’s knee.

Outside, the sun was shining, scorching the asphalt of driveways. Lawn mower engines whirred, and children splashed in backyard pools. Dad was in the outbuilding, where he had a forge. Mom was in the kitchen cooking hamburgers. Everything was boring. Everything was fine.

When the knock came, Jude hopped up to answer it. She hoped it might be one of the girls from across the street, wanting to play video games or inviting her for an after-dinner swim.

The tall man stood on their mat, glaring down at her. He wore a brown leather duster despite the heat. His shoes were shod with silver, and they rang hollowly as he stepped over the threshold. Jude looked up into his shadowed face and shivered.

“Mom,” she yelled. “Moooooooooom. Someone’s here.”

Her mother came from the kitchen, wiping wet hands on her jeans. When she saw the man, she went pale. “Go to your room,” she told Jude in a scary voice. “*Now!*”

“Whose child is that?” the man asked, pointing at her. His voice was oddly accented. “Yours? His?”

“No one’s.” Mom didn’t even look in Jude’s direction. “She’s no one’s child.”

That wasn’t right. Jude and Taryn looked just like their dad. Everyone said so. She took a few steps toward the stairs but didn’t want to be alone in her room. *Vivi,* Jude thought. *Vivi will know who the tall man is. Vivi will know what to do.*

But Jude couldn’t seem to make herself move any farther.

“I’ve seen many impossible things,” the man said. “I have seen the acorn before the oak. I have seen the spark before the flame. But never have I seen such as this: A dead woman living. A child born from nothing.”

Mom seemed at a loss for words. Her body was vibrating with tension. Jude wanted to take her hand and squeeze it, but she didn’t dare.

“I doubted Balekin when he told me I’d find you here,” said the man, his voice softening. “The bones of an earthly woman and her unborn child in the burned remains of my estate were convincing. Do you know what it is

to return from battle to find your wife dead, your only heir with her? To find your life reduced to ash?”

Mom shook her head, not as if she was answering him, but as though she was trying to shake off the words.

He took a step toward her, and she took a step back. There was something wrong with the tall man’s leg. He moved stiffly, as though it hurt him. The light was different in the entry hall, and Jude could see the odd green tint of his skin and the way his lower teeth seemed too large for his mouth.

She was able to see that his eyes were like Vivi’s.

“I was never going to be happy with you,” Mom told him. “Your world isn’t for people like me.”

The tall man regarded her for a long moment. “You made vows,” he said finally.

She lifted her chin. “And then I renounced them.”

His gaze went to Jude, and his expression hardened. “What is a promise from a mortal wife worth? I suppose I have my answer.”

Mom turned. At her mother’s look, Jude dashed into the living room.

Taryn was still sleeping. The television was still on. Vivienne looked up with half-lidded cat eyes. “Who’s at the door?” she asked. “I heard arguing.”

“A scary man,” Jude told her, out of breath even though she’d barely run at all. Her heart was pounding. “We’re supposed to go upstairs.”

She didn’t care that Mom had told only *her* to go upstairs. She wasn’t going by herself. With a sigh, Vivi unfolded from the couch and shook Taryn awake. Drowsily, Jude’s twin followed them into the hallway.

As they started toward the carpet-covered steps, Jude saw her father come in from the back garden. He held an axe in his hand—forged to be a near replica of one he’d studied in a museum in Iceland. It wasn’t weird to see Dad with an axe. He and his friends were into old weapons and would spend lots of time talking about “material culture” and sketching ideas for fantastical blades. What was odd was the way he held the weapon, as if he was going to—

Her father swung the axe toward the tall man.

He had never raised a hand to discipline Jude or her sisters, even when they got into big trouble. He wouldn’t hurt anyone. He just wouldn’t.

And yet. And yet.

The axe went past the tall man, biting into the wood trim of the door.

Taryn made an odd, high keening noise and slapped her palms over her mouth.

The tall man drew a curved blade from beneath his leather coat. A *sword*, like from a storybook. Dad was trying to pull the axe free from the doorframe when the man plunged the sword into Dad's stomach, pushing it upward. There was a sound, like sticks snapping, and an animal cry. Dad fell to the vestibule carpet, the one Mom always yelled about when they tracked mud on it.

The rug that was turning red.

Mom screamed. Jude screamed. Taryn and Vivi screamed. Everyone seemed to be screaming, except the tall man.

"Come here," he said, looking directly at Vivi.

"Y-you monster," their mother shouted, moving toward the kitchen. "He's dead!"

"Do not run from me," the man told her. "Not after what you've done. If you run again, I swear I—"

But she did run. She was almost around the corner when his blade struck her in the back. She crumpled to the linoleum, falling arms knocking magnets off the fridge.

The smell of fresh blood was heavy in the air, like wet, hot metal. Like those scrubbing pads Mom used to clean the frying pan when stuff was really stuck on.

Jude ran at the man, slamming her fists against his chest, kicking at his legs. She wasn't even scared. She wasn't sure she felt anything at all.

The man paid Jude no mind. For a long moment, he just stood there, as though he couldn't quite believe what he'd done. As though he wished he could take back the last five minutes. Then he sank to one knee and caught hold of Jude's shoulders. He pinned her arms to her sides so she couldn't hit him anymore, but he wasn't even looking at her.

His gaze was on Vivienne.

"You were stolen from me," he told her. "I have come to take you to your true home, in Elfhame beneath the hill. There, you will be rich beyond measure. There, you will be with your own kind."

“No,” Vivi told him in her somber little voice. “I’m never going anywhere with you.”

“I’m your father,” he told her, his voice harsh, rising like the crack of a lash. “You are my heir and my blood, and you will obey me in this as in all things.”

She didn’t move, but her jaw set.

“You’re not her father,” Jude shouted at the man. Even though he and Vivi had the same eyes, she wouldn’t let herself believe it.

His grip tightened on her shoulders, and she made a little squeezed, squeaking sound, but she stared up defiantly. She’d won plenty of staring contests.

He looked away first, turning to watch Taryn, on her knees, shaking Mom while she sobbed, as though she was trying to wake her up. Mom didn’t move. Mom and Dad were dead. They were never going to move again.

“I hate you,” Vivi proclaimed to the tall man with a viciousness that Jude was glad of. “I will always hate you. I vow it.”

The man’s stony expression didn’t change. “Nonetheless, you will come with me. Ready these little humans. Pack light. We ride before dark.”

Vivienne’s chin came up. “Leave them alone. If you have to, take me, but not them.”

He stared at Vivi, and then he snorted. “You’d protect your sisters from me, would you? Tell me, then, where would you have them go?”

Vivi didn’t answer. They had no grandparents, no living family at all. At least, none they knew.

He looked at Jude again, released her shoulders, and rose to his feet. “They are the progeny of my wife and, thus, my responsibility. I may be cruel, a monster, and a murderer, but I do not shirk my responsibilities. Nor should you shirk yours as the eldest.”

Years later, when Jude told herself the story of what happened, she couldn’t recall the part where they packed. Shock seemed to have erased that hour entirely. Somehow Vivi must have found bags, must have put in their favorite picture books and their most beloved toys, along with photographs and pajamas and coats and shirts.

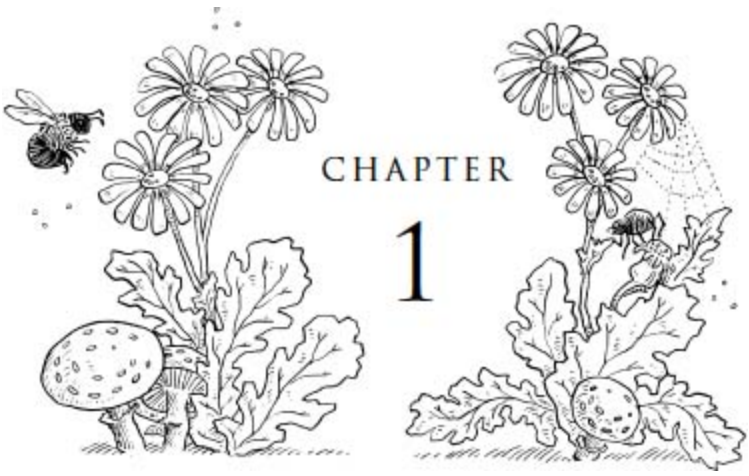
Or maybe Jude had packed for herself. She was never sure.

She couldn’t imagine how they’d done it, with their parents’ bodies cooling downstairs. She couldn’t imagine how it had felt, and as the years went by, she couldn’t make herself feel it again. The horror of the murders dulled with time. Her memories of the day blurred.

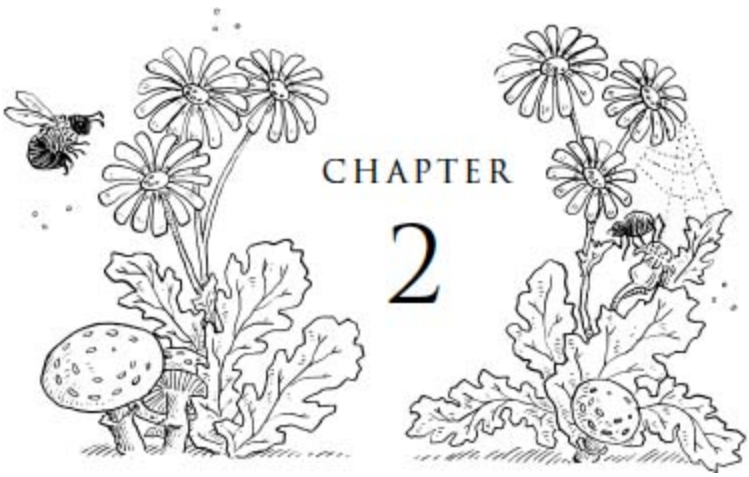
A black horse was nibbling the grass of the lawn when they went outside. Its eyes were big and soft. Jude wanted to throw her arms around its neck and press her wet face into its silky mane. Before she could, the tall man swung her and then Taryn across the saddle, handling them like baggage rather than children. He put Vivi up behind him.

“Hold on,” he said.

Jude and her sisters wept the whole way to Faerieland.



In Faerie, there are no fish sticks, no ketchup, no television.



CHAPTER 2

I sit on a cushion as an imp braids my hair back from my face. The imp's fingers are long, her nails sharp. I wince. Her black eyes meet mine in the claw-footed mirror on my dressing table.

"The tournament is still four nights away," the creature says. Her name is Tatterfell, and she's a servant in Madoc's household, stuck here until she works off her debt to him. She's cared for me since I was a child. It was Tatterfell who smeared stinging faerie ointment over my eyes to give me True Sight so that I could see through most glamours, who brushed the mud from my boots, and who strung dried rowan berries for me to wear around my neck so I might resist enchantments. She wiped my wet nose and reminded me to wear my stockings inside out, so I'd never be led astray in the forest. "And no matter how eager you are for it, you cannot make the moon set nor rise any faster. Try to bring glory to the general's household tonight by appearing as comely as we can make you."

I sigh.

She's never had much patience with my peevishness. "It's an honor to dance with the High King's Court under the hill."

The servants are overfond of telling me how fortunate I am, a bastard daughter of a faithless wife, a human without a drop of faerie blood, to be treated like a trueborn child of Faerie. They tell Taryn much the same thing.

I know it’s an honor to be raised alongside the Gentry’s own children. A terrifying honor, of which I will never be worthy.

It would be hard to forget it, with all the reminders I am given.

“Yes,” I say instead, because she is trying to be kind. “It’s great.”

Faeries can’t lie, so they tend to concentrate on words and ignore tone, especially if they haven’t lived among humans. Tatterfell gives me an approving nod, her eyes like two wet beads of jet, neither pupil nor iris visible. “Perhaps someone will ask for your hand and you’ll be made a permanent member of the High Court.”

“I want to win my place,” I tell her.

The imp pauses, hairpin between her fingers, probably considering pricking me with it. “Don’t be foolish.”

There’s no point in arguing, no point to reminding her of my mother’s disastrous marriage. There are two ways for mortals to become permanent subjects of the Court: marrying into it or honing some great skill—in metallurgy or lute playing or whatever. Not interested in the first, I have to hope I can be talented enough for the second.

She finishes braiding my hair into an elaborate style that makes me look as though I have horns. She dresses me in sapphire velvet. None of it disguises what I am: human.

“I put in three knots for luck,” the little faerie says, not unkindly.

I sigh as she scuttles toward the door, getting up from my dressing table to sprawl facedown on my tapestry-covered bed. I am used to having servants attend to me. Imps and hobs, goblins and grigs. Gossamer wings and green nails, horns and fangs. I have been in Faerie for ten years. None of it seems all that strange anymore. Here, I am the strange one, with my blunt fingers, round ears, and mayfly life.

Ten years is a long time for a human.

After Madoc stole us from the human world, he brought us to his estates on Insmire, the Isle of Might, where the High King of Elfhame keeps his stronghold. There, Madoc raised us—me and Vivienne and Taryn—out of an obligation of honor. Even though Taryn and I are the evidence of Mom’s betrayal, by the customs of Faerie, we’re his wife’s kids, so we’re his problem.

As the High King’s general, Madoc was away often, fighting for the crown. We were well cared for nonetheless. We slept on mattresses stuffed

with the soft seed-heads of dandelions. Madoc personally instructed us in the art of fighting with the cutlass and dagger, the falchion and our fists. He played Nine Men's Morris, Fidchell, and Fox and Geese with us before a fire. He let us sit on his knee and eat off his plate.

Many nights I drifted off to sleep to his rumbling voice reading from a book of battle strategy. And despite myself, despite what he'd done and what he was, I came to love him. I do love him.

It's just not a comfortable kind of love.

"Nice braids," Taryn says, rushing into my room. She's dressed in crimson velvet. Her hair is loose—long chestnut curls that fly behind her like a capelet, a few strands braided with gleaming silver thread. She hops onto the bed beside me, disarranging my small pile of threadbare stuffed animals—a koala, a snake, a black cat—all beloved of my seven-year-old self. I cannot bear to throw out any of my relics.

I sit up to take a self-conscious look in the mirror. "I like them."

"I'm having a premonition," Taryn says, surprising me. "We're going to have fun tonight."

"Fun?" I'd been imagining myself frowning at the crowd from our usual bolt-hole and worrying over whether I'd do well enough in the tournament to impress one of the royal family into granting me knighthood. Just thinking about it makes me fidgety, yet I think about it constantly. My thumb brushes over the missing tip of my ring finger, my nervous tic.

"Yes," she says, poking me in the side.

"Hey! Ow!" I scoot out of range. "What exactly does this plan entail?" Mostly, when we go to Court, we hide ourselves away. We've watched some very interesting things, but from a distance.

She throws up her hands. "What do you mean, what does fun entail? It's fun!"

I laugh a little nervously. "You have no idea, either, do you? Fine. Let's go see if you have a gift for prophecy."

We are getting older and things are changing. We are changing. And as eager as I am for it, I am also afraid.

Taryn pushes herself off my bed and holds out her arm, as though she's my escort for a dance. I allow myself to be guided from the room, my hand going automatically to assure myself that my knife is still strapped to my hip.

The interior of Madoc’s house is whitewashed plaster and massive, rough-cut wooden beams. The glass panes in the windows are stained gray as trapped smoke, making the light strange. As Taryn and I go down the spiral stairs, I spot Vivi hiding in a little balcony, frowning over a comics zine stolen from the human world.

Vivi grins at me. She’s in jeans and a billowy shirt—obviously not intending to go to the revel. Being Madoc’s legitimate daughter, she feels no pressure to please him. She does what she likes. Including reading magazines that might have iron staples rather than glue binding their pages, not caring if her fingers get singed.

“Heading somewhere?” she asks softly from the shadows, startling Taryn.

Vivi knows perfectly well where we’re heading.

When we first came here, Taryn and Vivi and I would huddle in Vivi’s big bed and talk about what we remembered from home. We’d talk about the meals Mom burned and the popcorn Dad made. Our next-door neighbors’ names, the way the house smelled, what school was like, the holidays, the taste of icing on birthday cakes. We’d talk about the shows we’d watched, rehashing the plots, recalling the dialogue until all our memories were polished smooth and false.

There’s no more huddling in bed now, rehashing anything. All our new memories are of here, and Vivi has only a passing interest in those.

She’d vowed to hate Madoc, and she stuck to her vow. When Vivi wasn’t reminiscing about home, she was a terror. She broke things. She screamed and raged and pinched us when we were content. Eventually, she stopped all of it, but I believe there is a part of her that hates us for adapting. For making the best of things. For making this our home.

“You should come,” I tell her. “Taryn’s in a weird mood.”

Vivi gives her a speculative look and then shakes her head. “I’ve got other plans.” Which might mean she’s going to sneak over to the mortal world for the evening or it might mean she’s going to spend it on the balcony, reading.

Either way, if it annoys Madoc, it pleases Vivi.

He’s waiting for us in the hall with his second wife, Oriana. Her skin is the bluish color of skim milk, and her hair is as white as fresh-fallen snow. She is beautiful but unnerving to look at, like a ghost. Tonight she is

wearing green and gold, a mossy dress with an elaborate shining collar that makes the pink of her mouth, her ears, and her eyes stand out. Madoc is dressed in green, too, the color of deep forests. The sword at his hip is no ornament.

Outside, past the open double doors, a hob waits, holding the silver bridles of five dappled faerie steeds, their manes braided in complicated and probably magical knots. I think of the knots in my hair and wonder how similar they are.

“You both look well,” Madoc says to Taryn and me, the warmth in his tone making the words a rare compliment. His gaze goes to the stairs. “Is your sister on her way?”

“I don’t know where Vivi is,” I lie. Lying is so easy here. I can do it all day long and never be caught. “She must have forgotten.”

Disappointment passes over Madoc’s face, but not surprise. He heads outside to say something to the hob holding the reins. Nearby, I see one of his spies, a wrinkled creature with a nose like a parsnip and a back hunched higher than her head. She slips a note into his hand and darts off with surprising nimbleness.

Oriana looks us over carefully, as though she expects to find something amiss.

“Be careful tonight,” Oriana says. “Promise me you will neither eat nor drink nor dance.”

“We’ve been to Court before,” I remind her, a Faerie nonanswer if ever there was one.

“You may think salt is sufficient protection, but you children are forgetful. Better to go without. As for dancing, once begun, you mortals will dance yourselves to death if we don’t prevent it.”

I look at my feet and say nothing.

We children are not forgetful.

Madoc married her seven years ago, and shortly after, she gave him a child, a sickly boy named Oak, with tiny, adorable horns on his head. It has always been clear that Oriana puts up with me and Taryn only for Madoc’s sake. She seems to think of us as her husband’s favored hounds: poorly trained and likely to turn on our master at any moment.

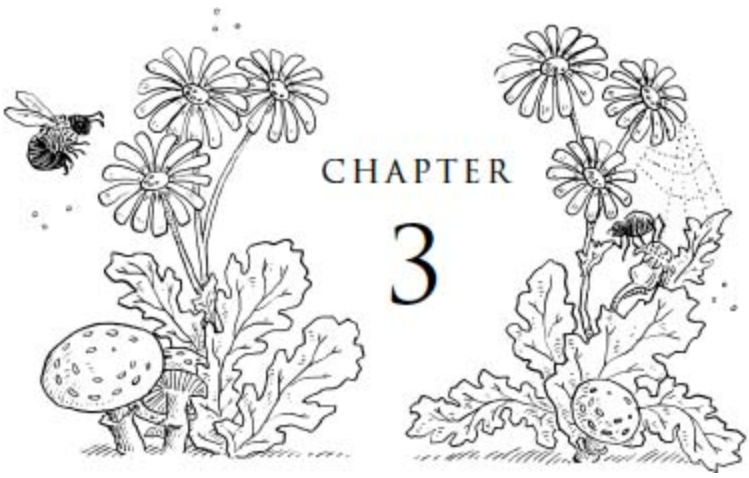
Oak thinks of us as sisters, which I can tell makes Oriana nervous, even though I would never do anything to hurt him.

“You are under Madoc’s protection, and he has the favor of the High King,” Oriana says. “I will not see Madoc made to look foolish because of your mistakes.”

With that little speech complete, she walks out toward the horses. One snorts and strikes the ground with a hoof.

Taryn and I share a look and then follow her. Madoc is already seated on the largest of the faerie steeds, an impressive creature with a scar beneath one eye. Its nostrils flare with impatience. It tosses its mane restlessly.

I swing up onto a pale green horse with sharp teeth and a swampy odor. Taryn chooses a rouncy and kicks her heels against its flanks. She takes off like a shot, and I follow, plunging into the night.



CHAPTER 3

Faeries are twilight creatures, and I have become one, too. We rise when the shadows grow long and head to our beds before the sun rises. It is well after midnight when we arrive at the great hill at the Palace of Elfhame. To go inside, we must ride between two trees, an oak and a thorn, and then straight into what appears to be the stone wall of an abandoned folly. I've done it hundreds of times, but I flinch anyway. My whole body braces, I grip the reins hard, and my eyes mash shut.

When I open them, I am inside the hill.

We ride on through a cavern, between pillars of roots, over packed earth.

There are dozens of the Folk here, crowding around the entrance to the vast throne room, where Court is being held—long-nosed pixies with tattered wings; elegant, green-skinned ladies in long gowns with goblins holding up their trains; tricksy boggans; laughing foxkin; a boy in an owl mask and a golden headdress; an elderly woman with crows crowding her shoulders; a gaggle of girls with wild roses in their hair; a bark-skinned boy with feathers around his neck; a group of knights all in scarab-green armor. Many I've seen before; a few I have spoken with. Too many for my eyes to drink them all in, yet I cannot look away.

I never get tired of this—of the spectacle, of the pageantry. Maybe Oriana isn't entirely wrong to worry that we might one day get caught up in it, be

carried away by it, and forget to take care. I can see why humans succumb to the beautiful nightmare of the Court, why they willingly drown in it.

I know I shouldn't love it as I do, stolen as I am from the mortal world, my parents murdered. But I love it all the same.

Madoc swings down from his horse. Oriana and Taryn are already off theirs, handing them over to grooms. It's me they're waiting for. Madoc reaches out his fingers like he is going to help me, but I hop off the saddle on my own. My leather slippers hit the ground like a slap.

I hope that I look like a knight to him.

Oriana steps forward, probably to remind Taryn and me of all the things she doesn't want us to do. I don't give her the chance. Instead, I hook my arm through Taryn's and hurry along inside. The room is redolent with burning rosemary and crushed herbs. Behind us, I can hear Madoc's heavy step, but I know where I am going. The first thing we have to do when we get to Court is greet the king.

The High King Eldred sits on his throne in gray robes of state, a heavy golden oak-leaf crown holding down his thin, spun-gold hair. When we bow, he touches our heads lightly with his knobby, be-ringed hands, and then we rise.

His grandmother was Queen Mab, of the House of the Greenbriar. She lived as one of the solitary fey before she began to conquer Faerie with her horned consort and his stag-riders. Because of him, each of Eldred's six heirs are said to have some animal characteristic, a thing that is not unusual in Faerie but is unusual among the trooping Gentry of the Courts.

The eldest prince, Balekin, and his younger brother, Dain, stand nearby, drinking wine from wooden cups banded in silver. Dain wears breeches that stop at his knees, showing his hooves and deer legs. Bale-kin wears the greatcoat he favors, with a collar of bear fur. His fingers have a thorn at each knuckle, and thorns ridge his arm, running up under the cuffs of his shirt, visible when he and Dain urge Madoc over.

Oriana curtsies to them. Although Dain and Balekin are standing together, they are often at odds with each other and with their sister Elowyn —so often that the Court is considered to be divided into three warring circles of influence.

Prince Balekin, the firstborn, and his set are known as the Circle of Grackles, for those who enjoy merriment and who scorn anything getting in

the way of it. They drink themselves sick and numb themselves with poisonous and delightful powders. His is the wildest circle, although he has always been perfectly composed and sober when speaking with me. I suppose I could throw myself into debauchery and hope to impress them. I'd rather not, though.

Princess Elowyn, the second-born, and her companions have the Circle of Larks. They value art above all else. Several mortals have found favor in her circle, but since I have no real skill with a lute or declaiming, I have no chance of being one of them.

Prince Dain, third-born, leads what's known as the Circle of Falcons. Knights, warriors, and strategists are in their favor. Madoc, obviously, belongs to this circle. They talk about honor, but what they really care about is power. I am good enough with a blade, knowledgeable in strategy. All I need is a chance to prove myself.

"Go enjoy yourselves," Madoc tells us. With a look back at the princes, Taryn and I head out into the throng.

The palace of the King of Elfhame has many secret alcoves and hidden corridors, perfect for trysts or assassins or staying out of the way and being really dull at parties. When Taryn and I were little, we would hide under the long banquet tables. But since she determined we were elegant ladies, too big to get our dresses dirty crawling around on the floor, we had to find a better spot. Just past the second landing of stone steps is an area where a large mass of shimmering rock juts out, creating a ledge. Normally, that's where we settle ourselves to listen to the music and watch all the fun we aren't supposed to be having.

Tonight, however, Taryn has a different idea. She passes the steps and grabs food off a silver tray—a green apple and a wedge of blue-veined cheese. Not bothering with salt, she takes a bite of each, holding the apple out for me to bite. Oriana thinks we can't tell the difference between regular fruit and faerie fruit, which blooms a deep gold. Its flesh is red and dense, and the cloying smell of it fills the forests at harvest time.

The apple is crisp and cold in my mouth. We pass it back and forth, sharing down to the core, which I eat in two bites.

Near where I am standing, a tiny faerie girl with a clock of white hair, like that of a dandelion, and a little knife cuts the strap of an ogre's belt. It's slick work. A moment later, his sword and pouch are gone, she's losing

herself in the crowd, and I can almost believe it didn't happen. Until the girl looks back at me.

She winks.

A moment after that, the ogre realizes he was robbed.

"I smell a thief!" he shouts, casting around him, knocking over a tankard of dark brown beer, his warty nose sniffing the air.

Nearby, there's a commotion—one of the candles flares up in blue crackling flames, sparking loudly and distracting even the ogre. By the time it returns to normal, the white-haired thief is well gone.

With a half smile, I turn back to Taryn, who watches the dancers with longing, oblivious to much else.

"We could take turns," she proposes. "If you can't stop, I'll pull you out. Then you'll do the same for me."

My heartbeat speeds at the thought. I look at the throng of revelers, trying to build up the daring of someone who would rob an ogre right under his nose.

Princess Elowyn whirls at the center of a circle of Larks. Her skin is a glittering gold, her hair the deep green of ivy. Beside her, a human boy plays the fiddle. Two more mortals accompany him less skillfully, but more joyfully, on ukuleles. Elowyn's younger sister Caelia spins nearby, with corn silk hair like her father's and a crown of flowers in it.

A new ballad begins, and the words drift up to me. "*Of all the sons King William had, Prince Jamie was the worst,*" they sing. "*And what made the sorrow even greater, Prince Jamie was the first.*"

I've never much liked that song because it reminds me of someone else. Someone who, along with Princess Rhyia, doesn't appear to be attending tonight. But—oh no. I do see him.

Prince Cardan, sixth-born to the High King Eldred, yet still the absolute worst, strides across the floor toward us.

Valerian, Nicasia, and Locke—his three meanest, fanciest, and most loyal friends—follow him. The crowd parts and hushes, bowing as they pass. Cardan is wearing his usual scowl, accessorized with kohl under his eyes and a circlet of gold in his midnight hair. He has on a long black coat with a high, jagged collar, the whole thing stitched with a pattern of constellations. Valerian is in deep red, cabochon rubies sparkling on his cuffs, each like a drop of frozen blood. Nicasia's hair is the blue-green of the ocean, crowned

with a diadem of pearls. A glittering cobweb net covers her braids. Locke brings up the rear, looking bored, his hair the precise color of fox fur.

"They're ridiculous," I say to Taryn, who follows my gaze. I cannot deny that they're also beautiful. Faerie lords and ladies, just like in the songs. If we didn't have to take lessons alongside them, if I didn't know firsthand what a scourge they were to those who displeased them, I'd probably be as in love with them as everyone else is.

"Vivi says that Cardan has a tail," Taryn whispers. "She saw it when she was swimming in the lake with him and Princess Rhyia this past full moon night."

I can't imagine Cardan swimming in a lake, jumping in the water, splashing people, laughing at something other than their suffering. "A *tail*?" I echo, an incredulous smile starting on my face and then fading when I remember that Vivi didn't bother to tell me the story, even though it must have happened days ago. Three is an odd configuration of sisters. There's always one on the outside.

"With a tuft on the end! It coils up under his clothes and unfurls like a whip." She giggles, and I can barely understand her next words. "Vivi said she wishes she had one."

"I'm glad she doesn't," I say firmly, which is stupid. I have nothing against tails.

Then Cardan and his companions are too close for us to safely talk about them. I turn my gaze to the floor. Though I hate it, I sink to the ground on one knee, bend my head, and grit my teeth. By my side, Taryn does something similar. All around us, people are making obeisances.

Don't look at us, I think. *Don't look.*

As Valerian passes, he grabs one of my braided horns. The others move on through the throng as Valerian sneers down at me.

"Did you think I didn't see you there? You and your sister stand out in any crowd," he says, leaning in close. His breath is heavy with the scent of honey wine. My hand balls into a fist at my side, and I am conscious of the nearness of my knife. Still, I do not look him in the eye. "No other head of hair so dull, no other face so plain."

"Valerian," Prince Cardan calls. He is glowering already and when he sees me, his eyes narrow further.

Valerian gives my braid a hard tug. I wince, useless fury coiling in my belly. He laughs and moves on.

My fury curdles into shame. I wish I had smacked his hand away, even though it would have made everything worse.

Taryn sees something in my face. “What did he say to you?”

I shake my head.

Cardan has stopped beside a boy with long copper hair and a pair of small moth wings—a boy who isn’t bowing. The boy laughs and Cardan lunges. Between one eyeblink and the next, the prince’s balled fist strikes the boy hard across the jaw, sending him sprawling. As the boy falls, Cardan grabs one of his wings. It tears like paper. The boy’s scream is thin and reedy. He curls up into himself on the ground, agony plain on his face. I wonder if faerie wings grow back; I know that butterflies that lose a wing never fly again.

The courtiers around us gape and titter, but only for a moment. Then they go back to their dancing and their songs, and the revel spirals on.

This is how they are. Someone gets in Cardan’s way, and they’re instantly and brutally punished. Driven from taking lessons at the palace, sometimes out of the Court entirely. Hurt. Broken.

As Cardan walks past the boy, apparently done with him, I am grateful that Cardan has five more worthy brothers and sisters; it’s practically guaranteed that he’ll never sit on the throne. I don’t want to think of him with more power than he has.

Even Nicasia and Valerian share a weighted glance. Then Valerian shrugs and follows Cardan. But Locke pauses by the boy, bending down to help him to his feet.

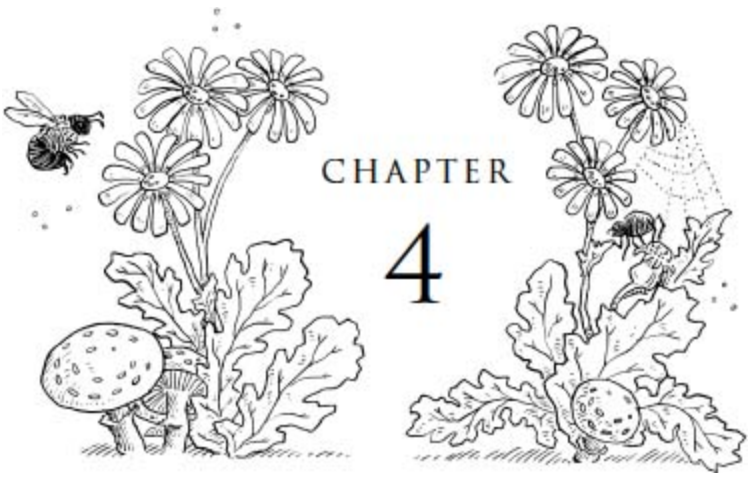
The boy’s friends come over to lead him away, and at that moment, improbably, Locke’s gaze lifts. His tawny fox eyes meet mine and widen in surprise. I am immobilized, my heart speeding. I brace myself for more scorn, but then one corner of his mouth lifts. He winks, as if in acknowledgment of being caught out. As if we’re sharing a secret. As if he thinks I am not loathly, as though he does not find my mortality contagious.

“Stop staring at him,” Taryn demands.

“Didn’t you see—” I start to explain, but she cuts me off, grabbing hold of me and hauling us toward the stairs, toward our landing of shimmering stone, where we can hide. Her nails sink into my skin.

“Don’t give them any more reason to bother you than they’ve already got!” The intensity of her response surprises me into snatching back my hand. Angry red half moons mark where she grabbed me.

I look back toward where Locke was, but the crowd has swallowed him up.



CHAPTER 4

As dawn breaks, I open the windows to my bedroom and let the last of the cool night air flow in as I strip off my Court dress. I feel hot all over. My skin feels too tight, and my heart won't stop racing.

I've been to Court before many times. I've been witness to more awfulness than wings being torn or my person insulted. Faeries make up for their inability to lie with a panoply of deceptions and cruelties. Twisted words, pranks, omissions, riddles, scandals, not to mention their revenges upon one another for ancient, half-remembered slights. Storms are less fickle than they are, seas less capricious.

Like, for example, as a redcap, Madoc needs bloodshed the way a mermaid needs the salt spray of the sea. After every battle, he ritually dips his hood into the blood of his enemies. I've seen the hood, kept under glass in the armory. The fabric is stiff and stained a brown so deep it's almost black, except for a few smears of green.

Sometimes I go down and stare at it, trying to see my parents in the tide lines of dried blood. I want to feel something, something besides a vague queasiness. I want to feel *more*, but every time I look at it, I feel less.

I think about going to the armory now, but I don't. I stand in front of my window and imagine myself a fearless knight, imagine myself a witch who hid her heart in her finger and then chopped her finger off.

“I’m so tired,” I say out loud. “So tired.”

I sit there for a long time, watching the rising sun gild the sky, listening to the waves crash as the tide goes out, when a creature flies up to alight on the edge of my window. At first it seems like an owl, but it’s got hob eyes. “Tired of what, sweetmeat?” it asks me.

I sigh and answer honestly for once. “Of being powerless.”

The hob studies my face, then flies off into the night.

I sleep the day away and wake disoriented, battling my way out of the long, embroidered curtains around my bed. Drool has dried along one of my cheeks.

I find bathwater waiting for me, but it has gone tepid. Servants must have come and gone. I climb in anyway and splash my face. Living in Faerie, it’s impossible not to notice that everyone else smells like verbena or crushed pine needles, dried blood or milkweed. I smell like pit sweat and sour breath unless I scrub myself clean.

When Tatterfell comes in to light the lamps, she finds me dressing for a lecture, which begins in the late afternoons and stretches on into some evenings. I wear gray leather boots and a tunic with Madoc’s crest—a dagger, a crescent moon turned on its side so it rests like a cup, and a single drop of blood falling from one corner embroidered in silk thread.

Downstairs, I find Taryn at the banquet table, alone, nursing a cup of nettle tea and picking at a bannock. Today, she does not suggest anything will be fun.

Madoc insists—perhaps out of guilt or shame—that we be treated like the children of Faerie. That we take the same lessons, that we be given whatever they have. Changelings have been brought to the High Court before, but none of them has been raised like Gentry.

He doesn’t understand how much that makes them loathe us.

Not that I am not grateful. I like the lessons. Answering the lecturers cleverly is something no one can take from me, even if the lecturers themselves occasionally pretend otherwise. I will take a frustrated nod in

place of effusive praise. I will take it and be glad because it means I can belong whether they like it or not.

Vivi used to go with us, but then she became bored and didn't bother. Madoc raged, but since his approval of a thing only makes her despise it, all his railing just made her more determined to never, ever go back. She has tried to persuade us to stay home with her, but if Taryn and I cannot manage the machinations of the children of Faerie without quitting our lessons or running to Madoc, how will he ever believe we can manage the Court, where those same machinations will play out on a grander and more deadly scale?

Taryn and I set off, swinging our baskets. We don't have to leave Insmire to get to the High King's palace, but we do skirt the edge of two other tiny islands, Insmoor, Isle of Stone, and Insweal, Isle of Woe. All three are connected by half-submerged rocky paths and stones large enough that it's possible to leap your way from one to the next. A herd of stags is swimming toward Insmoor, seeking the best grazing. Taryn and I walk past the Lake of Masks and through the far corner of the Milkwood, picking our way past the pale, silvery trunks and bleached leaves. From there, we spot mermaids and merrows sunning themselves near craggy caves, their scales reflecting the amber glow of the late-afternoon sun.

All the children of the Gentry, regardless of age, are taught by lecturers from all over the kingdom on the grounds of the palace. Some afternoons we sit in groves carpeted with emerald moss, and other evenings we spend in high towers or up in trees. We learn about the movements of constellations in the sky, the medicinal and magical properties of herbs, the languages of birds and flowers and people as well as the language of the Folk (though it occasionally twists in my mouth), the composition of riddles, and how to walk soft-footed over leaves and brambles to leave neither trace nor sound. We are instructed in the finer points of the harp and the lute, the bow and the blade. Taryn and I watch them as they practice enchantments. For a break, we all play at war in a green field with a broad arc of trees.

Madoc trained me to be formidable even with a wooden sword. Taryn isn't bad, either, even though she doesn't bother practicing anymore. At the Summer Tournament, in only a few days, our mock war will take place in front of the royal family. With Madoc's endorsement, one of the princes or

princesses might choose to grant me knighthood and take me into their personal guard. It would be a kind of power, a kind of protection.

And with it, I could protect Taryn, too.

We arrive at school. Prince Cardan, Locke, Valerian, and Nicasia are already sprawled in the grass with a few other faeries. A girl with deer horns—Poesy—is giggling over something Cardan has said. They do not so much as look at us as we spread our blanket and set out our notebooks and pens and pots of ink.

My relief is immense.

Our lesson involves the history of the delicately negotiated peace between Orlagh, Queen of the Undersea, and the various faerie kings and queens of the land. Nicasia is Orlagh's daughter, sent to be fostered in the High King's Court. Many odes have been composed to Queen Orlagh's beauty, although, if she's anything like her daughter, not to her personality.

Nicasia gloats through the lesson, proud of her heritage. When the instructor moves on to Lord Roiben of the Court of Termites, I lose interest. My thoughts drift. Instead, I find myself thinking through combinations—strike, thrust, parry, block. I grip my pen as though it were the hilt of a blade and forget to take notes.

As the sun dips low in the sky, Taryn and I unpack our baskets from home, which contain bread, butter, cheese, and plums. I butter a piece of bread hungrily.

Passing us, Cardan kicks dirt onto my food right before I put it into my mouth. The other faeries laugh.

I look up to see him watching me with cruel delight, like a raptor bird trying to decide whether to be bothered devouring a small mouse. He's wearing a high-collared tunic embroidered with thorns, his fingers heavy with rings. His sneer is well-practiced.

I grit my teeth. I tell myself that if I let the taunts roll off me, he will lose interest. He will go away. I can endure this a little longer, a few more days.

"Something the matter?" Nicasia asks sweetly, wandering up and draping her arm over Cardan's shoulder. "Dirt. It's what you came from, mortal. It's what you'll return to soon enough. Take a big bite."

"Make me," I say before I can stop myself. Not the greatest comeback, but my palms begin to sweat. Taryn looks startled.

“I *could*, you know,” says Cardan, grinning as though nothing would please him more. My heart speeds. If I weren’t wearing a string of rowan berries, he could ensorcell me so that I thought dirt was some kind of delicacy. Only Madoc’s position would give him reason to hesitate. I do not move, do not touch the necklace hidden under the bodice of my tunic, the one that I hope will stop any glamour from working. The one I hope he doesn’t discover and rip from my throat.

I glance in the direction of the day’s lecturer, but the elderly phooka has his nose buried in a book.

Since Cardan’s a prince, it’s more than likely no one has ever cautioned him, has ever stayed his hand. I never know how far he’ll go, and I never know how far our instructors will let him.

“You don’t want that, do you?” Valerian asks with mock sympathy as he kicks more dirt onto our lunch. I didn’t even see him come over. Once, Valerian stole a silver pen of mine, and Madoc replaced it with a ruby-studded one from his own desk. This threw Valerian into such a rage that he cracked me in the back of the head with his wooden practice sword. “What if we promise to be nice to you for the whole afternoon if you eat everything in your baskets?” His smile is wide and false. “Don’t you want us for friends?”

Taryn looks down at her lap. *No*, I want to say. *We don’t want you for friends*.

I don’t answer, but I don’t look down, either. I meet Cardan’s gaze. There is nothing I can say to make them stop, and I know it. I have no power here. But today I can’t seem to choke down my anger at my own impotence.

Nicasia pulls a pin from my hair, causing one of my braids to fall against my neck. I swat at her hand, but it happens too fast.

“What’s this?” She’s holding up the golden pin, with a tiny cluster of filigree hawthorn berries at the top. “Did you steal it? Did you think it would make you beautiful? Did you think it would make you as we are?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Of course I want to be like them. They’re beautiful as blades forged in some divine fire. They will live forever. Valerian’s hair shines like polished gold. Nicasia’s limbs are long and perfectly shaped, her mouth the pink of coral, her hair the color of the deepest, coldest part of the sea. Fox-eyed Locke, standing silently behind Valerian, his expression schooled to careful indifference, has a chin as

pointed as the tips of his ears. And Cardan is even more beautiful than the rest, with black hair as iridescent as a raven's wing and cheekbones sharp enough to cut out a girl's heart. I hate him more than all the others. I hate him so much that sometimes when I look at him, I can hardly breathe.

"You'll never be our equal," Nicasia says.

Of course I won't.

"Oh, come on," Locke says with a careless laugh, his hand going around Nicasia's waist. "Let's leave them to their misery."

"Jude's sorry," Taryn says quickly. "We're both really sorry."

"She can show us how sorry she is," Cardan drawls. "Tell her she doesn't belong in the Summer Tournament."

"Afraid I'll win?" I ask, which isn't smart.

"It's not for mortals," he informs us, voice chilly. "Withdraw, or wish that you had."

I open my mouth, but Taryn speaks before I can. "I'll talk to her about it. It's nothing, just a game."

Nicasia gives my sister a magnanimous smile. Valerian leers at Taryn, his eyes lingering on her curves. "It's all just a game."

Cardan's gaze meets mine, and I know he isn't finished with me, not by a long shot.

"Why did you dare them like that?" Taryn asks when they've walked back to their own merry luncheon, all spread out for them. "Talking back to him—that's just stupid."

Make me.

Afraid I'll win?

"I know," I tell her. "I'll shut up. I just—I got angry."

"You're better off being scared," she advises. And then, shaking her head, she packs up our ruined food. My stomach growls, and I try to ignore it.

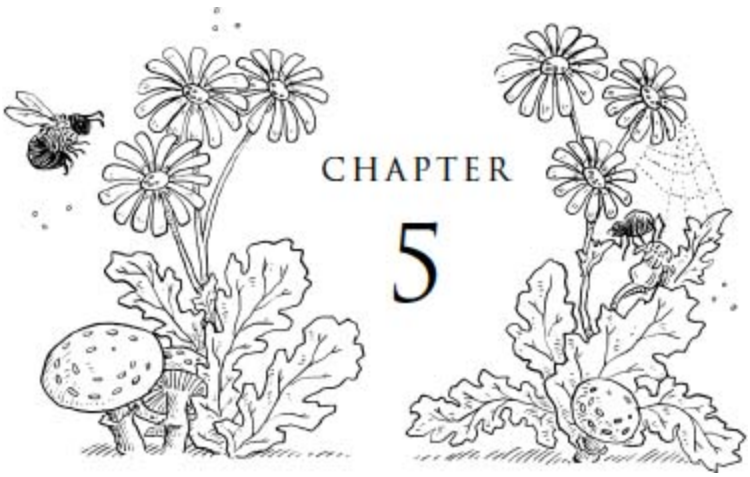
They want me to be afraid, I know that. During the mock war that very afternoon, Valerian trips me, and Cardan whispers foul things in my ear. I head home with bruises on my skin from kicks, from falls.

What they don't realize is this: Yes, they frighten me, but I have always been scared, since the day I got here. I was raised by the man who murdered my parents, reared in a land of monsters. I live with that fear, let it settle into my bones, and ignore it. If I didn't pretend not to be scared, I would

hide under my owl-down coverlets in Madoc’s estate forever. I would lie there and scream until there was nothing left of me. I refuse to do that. I will not do that.

Nicasia’s wrong about me. I don’t desire to do as well in the tournament as one of the fey. I want to win. I do not yearn to be their equal.

In my heart, I yearn to best them.



CHAPTER 5

On our way home, Taryn stops and picks blackberries beside the Lake of Masks. I sit on a rock in the moonlight and deliberately do not look into the water. The lake doesn't reflect your own face—it shows you someone else who has looked or will look into it. When I was little, I used to sit at the bank all day, staring at faerie countenances instead of my own, hoping that I might someday catch a glimpse of my mother looking back at me.

Eventually, it hurt too much to try.

"Are you going to quit the tournament?" Taryn asks, shoveling a handful of berries into her mouth. We are hungry children. Already we are taller than Vivi, our hips wider, and our breasts heavier.

I open my basket and take out a dirty plum, wiping it on my shirt. It's still more or less edible. I eat it slowly, considering. "You mean because of Cardan and his Court of Jerks?"

She frowns with an expression just like one I might make if she was being particularly thickheaded. "Do you know what they call us?" she demands. "*The Circle of Worms*."

I hurl the pit at the water, watching ripples destroy the possibility of any reflections. My lip curls.

"You're littering in a magical lake," she tells me.

“It’ll rot,” I say. “And so will we. They’re right. We are the Circle of Worms. We’re mortal. We don’t have forever to wait for them to let us do the things we want. I don’t care if they don’t like my being in the tournament. Once I become a knight, I’ll be beyond their reach.”

“Do you think Madoc’s going to allow that?” Taryn asks, giving up on the bush after the brambles make her fingers bleed. “Answering to someone other than him?”

“What else has he been training us for?” I ask. Wordlessly, we fall into step together, making our way home.

“Not me.” She shakes her head. “I am going to fall in love.”

I am surprised into laughter. “So you’ve just decided? I didn’t think it worked like that. I thought love was supposed to happen when you least expected it, like a sap to the skull.”

“Well, I *have* decided,” she says. I consider mentioning her last ill-fated decision—the one about having fun at the revel—but that will just annoy her. Instead, I try to imagine someone she might fall in love with. Maybe it will be a merrow, and he will give her the gift of breathing underwater and a crown of pearls and take her to his bed under the sea.

Actually, that sounds amazing. Maybe I am making all the wrong choices.

“How much do you like swimming?” I ask her.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I say.

She, suspecting some sort of teasing, elbows me in the side.

We head through the Crooked Forest, with its bent trunks, since the Milkwood is dangerous at night. We have to stop to let some root men pass, for fear they might step on us if we didn’t keep out of their way. Moss covers their shoulders and crawls up their bark cheeks. Wind whistles through their ribs.

They make a beautiful and solemn procession.

“If you’re so sure Madoc is going to give you permission, why haven’t you asked him yet?” Taryn whispers. “The tournament is only three days away.”

Anyone can fight in the Summer Tournament, but if I want to be a knight, I must declare my candidacy by wearing a green sash across my chest. And

if Madoc will not allow me that, then no amount of skill will help me. I will not be a candidate, and I will not be chosen.

I am glad the root men give me an excuse not to answer, because, of course, she's right. I haven't asked Madoc because I am afraid of what he will say.

When we get home, pushing open the enormous wooden door with its looping ironwork, someone is shouting upstairs, as though in distress. I run toward the sound, heart in my mouth, only to find Vivi in her room, chasing a cloud of sprites. They streak past me into the hall in a blast of gossamer, and she slams the book she was swinging at them into the door casing.

"Look!" Vivi yells at me, pointing toward her closet. "Look what they did."

The doors are open, and I see a sprawl of things stolen from the human world, matchbooks, newspapers, empty bottles, novels, and Polaroids. The sprites had turned the matchbooks into beds and tables, shredded all the paper, and ripped out the centers of the books to nest inside. It was a full-on sprite infestation.

But I am more baffled by the quantity of things Vivi has and how many of them don't seem to have any value. It's just junk. Mortal junk.

"What *is* all that?" Taryn asks, coming into the room. She bends down and extracts a strip of pictures, only gently chewed by sprites. The pictures are taken one right after the other, the kind you have to sit in a booth for. Vivi is in the photos, her arm draped over the shoulders of a grinning, pink-haired mortal girl.

Maybe Taryn isn't the only one who has decided to fall in love.

At dinner, we sit at a massive table carved along all four sides with images of piping fauns and dancing imps. Fat wax pillar candles burn at the center, beside a carved stone vase full of wood sorrel. Servants bring us silver plates piled with food. We eat fresh broad beans, venison with scattered pomegranate seeds, grilled brown trout with butter, a salad of bitter herbs, and, for after, raisin cakes smothered in apple syrup. Madoc and Oriana drink canary wine; we children mix ours with water.

Next to my plate and Taryn's is a bowl of salt.

Vivi pokes at her venison and then licks blood from her knife.

Oak grins across the table and starts to mimic Vivi, but Oriana snatches the cutlery from his grasp before he can slice his tongue open. Oak giggles and picks up his meat with his fingers, tearing at it with sharp teeth.

"You should know that the king will soon abdicate his throne in favor of one of his children," Madoc says, looking at all of us. "It is likely that he will choose Prince Dain."

It doesn't matter that Dain is third-born. The High Ruler chooses their successor—that's how the stability of Elfhame is ensured. The first High Queen, Mab, had her smith forge a crown. Lore has it that the blacksmith was a creature called Grimsen, who could shape anything from metal—birds that trill and necklaces that slither over throats, twin swords called Heartseeker and Heartsworn that never missed a strike. Queen Mab's crown was magically and wondrously wrought so that it passes only from one blood relation to another, in an unbroken line. With the crown passes the oaths of all those sworn to it. Although her subjects gather at each new coronation to renew their fealty, authority still rests in the crown.

"Why's he abdicating?" Taryn asks.

Vivi's smirk has turned nasty. "His children got impatient with him for remaining alive."

A wash of rage passes over Madoc's face. Taryn and I don't dare bait him for fear that his patience with us stretches only so far, but Vivi is expert at it. When he answers her, I can see the effort he's making to bite his tongue. "Few kings of Faerie have ruled so well for so long as Eldred. Now he goes to seek the Land of Promise."

As far as I can tell, the Land of Promise is their euphemism for death, although they do not admit it. They say it is the place that the Folk came from and to which they will eventually return.

"Are you saying he's leaving the throne because he's *old*?" I ask, wondering if I'm being impolite. There are hobs born with lined faces like tiny, hairless cats and smooth-limbed nixies whose true age shows only in their ancient eyes. I didn't think time mattered to them.

Oriana doesn't look happy, but she isn't actively shushing me, either, so maybe it's not *that* rude. Or maybe she doesn't expect any better than bad manners out of me.

“We may not die from age, but we grow weary with it,” Madoc says with a heavy sigh. “I have made war in Eldred’s name. I have broken Courts that denied him fealty. I have even led skirmishes against the Queen of the Undersea. But Eldred has lost his taste for bloodshed. He allows those under his banners to rebel in small and large ways even as other Courts refuse to submit to us. It’s time to ride to battle. It’s time for a new monarch, a hungry one.”

Oriana furrows her brow in mild confusion. “By preference, your kin would have you safe.”

“What good is a general with no war?” Madoc takes a large, restless swallow of wine. I wonder how often he needs to wet his cap with fresh blood. “The new king’s coronation will be at the autumn solstice. Worry not. I have a plan to ensure our futures. Only concern yourselves with making ready for a great deal of dancing.”

I am wondering what his plan might be when Taryn kicks me under the table. When I turn to glare at her, she raises both brows. “Ask him,” she mouths.

Madoc looks in her direction. “Yes?”

“Jude wants to ask you something,” Taryn says. The worst part is, I think she believes she’s helping.

I take a deep breath. At least he seems to be in a good mood. “I’ve been thinking about the tournament.” I imagined saying these words many, many times, but now that I am actually doing it, they don’t seem to come out the way I planned. “I’m not bad with a sword.”

“You do yourself too modest,” Madoc says. “Your salesmanship is excellent.”

That seems encouraging. I look over at Taryn, who appears to be holding her breath. Everyone at the table has gone still except for Oak, who taps his glass against the side of his plate. “I am going to fight in the Summer Tournament, and I want declare myself ready to be chosen for knighthood.”

Madoc’s brows go up. “That’s what you want? It’s dangerous work.”

I nod. “I’m not afraid.”

“Interesting,” he says. My heart thuds dully in my chest. I have thought through every aspect of this plan except for the possibility that he won’t allow it.

“I want to make my own way at the Court,” I say.

“You’re no killer,” he tells me. I flinch, my gaze coming up to his. He looks back at me steadily with his golden cat eyes.

“I could be,” I insist. “I’ve been training for a decade.”

Since you took me, I do not say, although it must be in my eyes.

He shakes his head sadly. “What you lack is nothing to do with experience.”

“No, but—” I begin.

“Enough. I have made my decision,” he says, raising his voice to cut me off. After a moment when we both are silent, he gives me a conciliatory half smile. “Fight in the tournament if you like, for sport, but you will not put on the green sash. You’re not ready to be a knight. You can ask me again after the coronation, if your heart’s still set on it. And if it’s a whim, that will be time enough for it to pass.”

“This is no whim!” I hate the desperation in my voice, but I have been counting down the days to the tournament. The idea of waiting months, just so he can turn me down again, fills me with wild despair.

Madoc gives me an unreadable look. “After the coronation,” he repeats.

I want to scream at him: Do you know how hard it is to always keep your head down? To swallow insults and endure outright threats? And yet I have done so. I thought it proved my toughness. I thought if you saw I could take whatever came at me and still smile, you would see that I was worthy.

You’re no killer.

He has no idea what I am.

Maybe I don’t know, either. Maybe I never let myself find out.

“Prince Dain will make a fine king,” Oriana says, deftly shifting the conversation back to pleasant things. “A coronation means a month of balls. We will need new dresses.” She seems to include Taryn and me in this sweeping statement. “Magnificent ones.”

Madoc nods, smiling his toothy smile. “Yes, yes, as many as you like. I would have you look your finest and dance your hardest.”

I try to breathe slowly, to concentrate on just one thing. The pomegranate seeds on my plate, shining like rubies, wet with venison blood.

After the coronation, Madoc said. I try to focus on that. It only feels like never.

I’d love to have a Court dress like the ones I have seen in Oriana’s wardrobe, opulent patterns intricately stitched on skirts of gold and silver,

each as beautiful as the dawn. I focus on that, too.

But then I go too far and imagine myself in that dress, sword at my hip, transformed, a true member of the Court, a knight in the Circle of Falcons. And Cardan watching me from across the room, standing beside the king, laughing at my pretension.

Laughing like he knows this is a fantasy that won't ever be real.

I pinch my leg until pain washes everything away.

"You'll have to wear out the soles of your shoes, just like the rest of us," Vivi says to me and Taryn. "I bet Oriana's sick with worry that since Madoc encouraged you to dance, she can't stop you. Horror of horrors, you might have a good time."

Oriana presses her lips together. "That's not fair, nor is it true."

Vivi rolls her eyes. "If it wasn't true, I couldn't say it."

"Enough, all of you!" Madoc slams his hand down on the table, making us all jump. "Coronations are a time when many things are possible. Change is coming, and there is no wisdom in crossing me."

I can't tell if he's talking about Prince Dain or ungrateful daughters or both.

"Are you afraid someone is going to try for the throne?" Taryn asks. Like me, she has been raised on strategy, moves and countermoves, ambushes and upper hands. But unlike me, she has Oriana's talent for asking the question that will steer a conversation toward less rocky shores.

"The Greenbriar line ought to worry, not me," Madoc says, but he looks pleased to be asked. "Doubtless some of their subjects wish there was no Blood Crown and no High King at all. His heirs ought to be particularly careful that the armies of Faerie are satisfied. A well-seasoned strategist waits for the right opportunity."

"Only someone with nothing to lose would attack the throne with you there to protect it," Oriana says primly.

"There's always something left to lose," Vivi says, and then makes a hideous face at Oak. He giggles.

Oriana reaches for him and then stops herself. Nothing bad is actually happening. And yet I see the gleam in Vivi's cat eyes, and I'm not sure Oriana's wrong to be nervous.

Vivi would like to punish Madoc, but her only power is to be a thorn in his side. Which means occasionally tormenting Oriana through Oak. I know

Vivi loves Oak—he's our brother, after all—but that doesn't mean she's above teaching him bad things.

Madoc smiles at all of us, now the picture of contentment. I used to think he didn't notice all the currents of tension that ran through the family, but as I get older, I see that barely suppressed conflict doesn't bother him in the least. He likes it just as well as open war. "Perhaps none of our enemies are particularly good strategists."

"Let's hope not," Oriana says distractedly, her eyes on Oak, lifting her glass of canary wine.

"Indeed," says Madoc. "Let's have a toast. To the incompetence of our enemies."

I pick up my glass and knock it into Taryn's, then drain it to the very dregs.

There's always something left to lose.

I think about that all through the dawn, turning it over in my head. Finally, when I can toss and turn no more, I pull on a robe over my nightgown and go outside into the late-morning sun. Bright as hammered gold, it hurts my eyes when I sit down on a patch of clover near the stables, looking back at the house.

All of this was my mother's before it was Oriana's. Mom must have been young and in love with Madoc back then. I wonder what it was like for her. I wonder if she thought she was going to be happy here.

I wonder when she realized she wasn't.

I have heard the rumors. It is no small thing to confound the High King's general, to sneak out of Faerie with his baby in your belly and hide for almost ten years. She left behind the burned remains of another woman in the blackened husk of his estate. No one can say she didn't prove her toughness. If she'd just been a little luckier, Madoc would have never realized she was still alive.

She had a lot to lose, I guess.

I've got a lot to lose, too.

But so what?

“Skip our lessons today,” I tell Taryn that afternoon. I am dressed and ready early. Though I have not slept, I do not feel at all tired. “Stay home.”

She gives me a look of deep concern as a pixie boy, newly indebted to Madoc, braids her chestnut hair into a crown. She is sitting primly at her dressing table, clad all in brown and gold. “Telling me not to go means I should. Whatever you’re thinking, stop. I know you’re disappointed about the tournament—”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, although, of course, it does. It matters so much that, now, without hope of knighthood, I feel like a hole has opened up under me and I am falling through it.

“Madoc might change his mind.” She follows me down the stairs, grabbing up our baskets before I can. “And at least now you won’t have to defy Cardan.”

I turn on her, even though none of this is her fault. “Do you know why Madoc won’t let me try for knighthood? Because he thinks I’m weak.”

“Jude,” she cautions.

“I thought I was supposed to be good and follow the rules,” I say. “But I am done with being weak. I am done with being good. I think I am going to be something else.”

“Only idiots aren’t scared of things that are scary,” Taryn says, which is undoubtedly true, but still fails to dissuade me.

“Skip lessons today,” I tell her again, but she won’t, so we go to school together.

Taryn watches me warily as I talk with the leader of the mock war, Fand, a pixie girl with skin the blue of flower petals. She reminds me that there’s a run-through tomorrow in preparation for the tournament.

I nod, biting the inside of my cheek. No one needs to know that my hopes were dashed. No one needs to know I ever had any hope at all.

Later, when Cardan, Locke, Nicasia, and Valerian sit down to their lunch, they have to spit out their food in choking horror. All around them are the less awful children of faerie nobles, eating their bread and honey, their cakes and roasted pigeons, their elderflower jam with biscuits and cheese

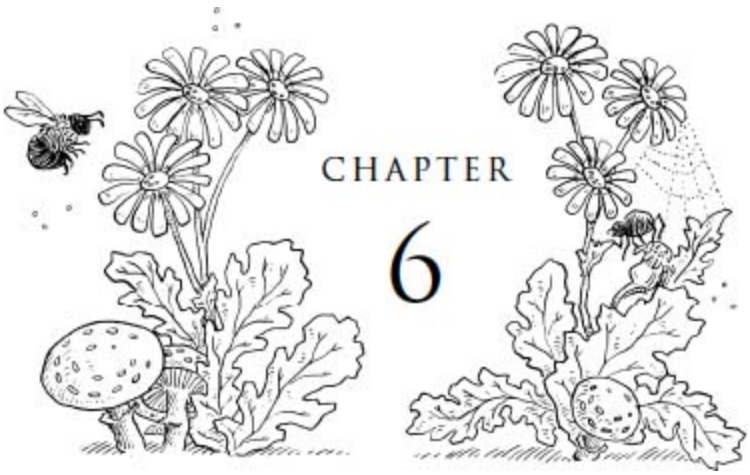
and the fat globes of grapes. But every single morsel in each of my enemies' baskets has been well and thoroughly salted.

Cardan's gaze catches mine, and I can't help the evil smile that pulls up the corners of my mouth. His eyes are bright as coals, his hatred a living thing, shimmering in the air between us like the air above black rocks on a blazing summer day.

"Have you lost your wits?" Taryn demands, shaking my shoulder so that I have to turn to her. "You're making everything worse. There's a reason no one stands up to them."

"I know," I say softly, unable to keep the smile off my lips. "A lot of reasons."

She's right to be worried. I just declared war.



I've told this story all wrong. There are things I really ought to have said about growing up in Faerie. I left them out of the story, mostly because I am a coward. I don't even like to let myself think about them. But maybe knowing a few relevant details about my past will make more sense of why I'm the way I am. How fear seeped into my marrow. How I learned to pretend it away.

So here are three things I should have told you about myself before, but didn't:

1. When I was nine, one of Madoc's guards bit off the very top of the ring finger on my left hand. We were outside, and when I screamed, he pushed me hard enough that my head smacked into a wooden post in the stables. Then he made me stand there while he chewed the piece he'd bitten off. He told me exactly how much he hated mortals. I bled so much—you wouldn't think that much blood could come out of a finger. When it was over, he explained that I better keep what happened secret, because if I didn't, he'd eat the rest of me. So, obviously, I didn't tell anyone. Until now, when I am telling you.

2. When I was eleven, I was spotted hiding under the banquet table at one of the revels by a particularly bored member of the Gentry. He dragged me out by one foot, kicking and squirming. I don’t think he knew who I was—at least, I tell myself he didn’t. But he compelled me to drink, and so I drank; the grass-green faerie wine slipping down my throat like nectar. He danced me around the hill. It was fun at first, the kind of terrifying fun that makes you screech to be put down half the time and feel dizzy and sick the rest. But when the fun wore off and I still couldn’t stop, it was just terrifying. It turned out that my fear was equally amusing to him, though. Princess Elowyn found me at the end of the revel, puking and crying. She didn’t ask me a single thing about how I got that way, she just handed me over to Oriana like I was a misplaced jacket. We never told Madoc about it. What would have been the point? Everyone who saw me probably thought I was having a grand old time.

3. When I was fourteen and Oak was four, he glamoured me. He didn’t mean to—well, at least he didn’t really understand why he shouldn’t. I wasn’t wearing any protective charms because I’d just come out of a bath. Oak didn’t want to go to bed. He told me to play dolls with him, so we played. He commanded me to chase him, so we played chase through the halls. Then he figured out he could make me slap myself, which was very funny. Tatterfell came upon us hours later, took a good look at my reddened cheeks and the tears in my eyes, and then ran for Oriana. For weeks, a giggling Oak tried to glamour me into getting him sweets or lifting him above my head or spitting at the dinner table. Even though it never worked, even though I wore a strand of rowan berries everywhere after that, it was all I could do for months not to strike him to the floor. Oriana has never forgiven me for that restraint—she believes my not revenging myself on him then means I plan to revenge myself in the future.

Here’s why I don’t like these stories: They highlight that I am vulnerable. No matter how careful I am, eventually I’ll make another misstep. I am weak. I am fragile. I am mortal.

I hate that most of all.

Even if, by some miracle, I could be better than them, I will never be one of them.

CHAPTER 7

They don’t wait long to retaliate.

For the rest of the afternoon and early evening, we receive lessons in history. A cat-headed goblin named Yarrow recites ballads and asks us questions. The more correct answers I give, the angrier Cardan grows. He makes no secret of his displeasure, drawling to Locke about how boring these lessons are and sneering at the lecturer.

For once, we’re done before dark has fully fallen. Taryn and I start for home, with her giving me concerned glances. The light of sunset filters through the trees, and I take a deep breath, drinking in the scent of pine needles. I feel a kind of weird calm, despite the stupidity of what I’ve done.

“This isn’t like you,” Taryn says finally. “You don’t pick fights with people.”

“Appeasing them won’t help.” I toe a stone with a slipper-covered foot. “The more they get away with, the more they believe they’re entitled to have.”

“So you’re going to, what—teach them manners?” Taryn sighs. “Even if someone should do it, that someone doesn’t have to be you.”

She’s right. I know she’s right. The giddy fury of this afternoon will fade, and I will regret what I’ve done. Probably after a good, long sleep, I’ll be as

horrified as Taryn is. All I have bought myself is worse problems, no matter how good it felt to salve my pride.

You're no killer.

What you lack is nothing to do with experience.

And yet, I don't regret it now. Having stepped off the edge, what I want to do is fall.

I begin to speak when a hand claps down over my mouth. Fingers sink into the skin around my lips. I strike out, swinging my body around, and see Locke grabbing Taryn's waist. Someone has my wrists. I wrench my mouth free and scream, but screams in Faerie are like birdsong, too common to attract much attention.

They push us through the woods, laughing. I hear a whoop from one of the boys. I think I hear Locke say something about larks being over quickly, but it's swallowed up in the merriment.

Then a shove at my shoulders and the horrible shock of cold water closing over me. I sputter, trying to breathe. I taste mud and reeds. I shove myself up. Taryn and I are waist-high in the river, the current pushing us downstream toward a deeper, rougher part. I dig my feet into the muck at the bottom to keep from being swept away. Taryn is gripping a boulder, her hair wet. She must have slipped.

"There are nixies in this river," Valerian says. "If you don't get out before they find you, they'll pull you under and hold you there. Their sharp teeth will sink into your skin." He mimes taking a bite.

They're all along the riverbank, Cardan closest, Valerian beside him. Locke brushes his hand over the tops of cattails and bulrushes, looking abstracted. He does not seem kind now. He seems bored with his friends and with us, too.

"Nixies can't help what they are," Nicasia says, kicking the water so that it splashes my face. "Just like you won't be able to help drowning."

I dig my feet deeper into the mud. The water filling my boots makes it hard to move my legs, but the mud locks them in place when I manage to stand still. I don't know how I am going to get to Taryn without slipping.

Valerian is emptying our schoolbags onto the riverbank. He and Nicasia and Locke take turns hurling the contents into the water. My leather-bound notebooks. Rolls of paper that disintegrate as they sink. The books of ballads and histories make an enormous splash, then lodge between two

stones and will not budge. My fine pen and nibs shimmer along the bottom. My inkpot shatters on the rocks, turning the river vermilion.

Cardan watches me. Although he doesn't lift a finger, I know this is all his doing. In his eyes, I see all the vast alienness of Faerie.

"Is this fun?" I call to the shore. I am so furious that there's no room for being scared. "Are you enjoying yourselves?"

"Enormously," says Cardan. Then his gaze slides from me to where shadows rest under the water. Are those nixies? I cannot tell. I just keep moving toward Taryn.

"This is just a game," Nicasia says. "But sometimes we play too hard with our toys. And then they break."

"It's not like we drowned you ourselves," Valerian calls.

My foot slips on slick rocks, and I am under, swept downstream helplessly, gulping muddy water. I panic, snorting into my lungs. I thrust out a hand, and it closes on the root of a tree. I get my balance again, gasping and coughing.

Nicasia and Valerian are laughing. Locke's expression is unreadable. Cardan has one foot in the reeds, as though to get a better look. Furious and sputtering, I push my way back to Taryn, who comes forward to grab my hand and squeeze it hard.

"I thought you were going to drown," she says, the edge of hysteria in her voice.

"We're fine," I tell her. Digging my feet into the murk, I reach down for a rock. I find a large one and heft it up, green and slick with algae. "If the nixies come at us, I'll hold them off."

"Quit," Cardan says. He's looking directly at me. He does not even spare a glance for Taryn. "You should never have been tutored with us. Abandon thoughts of the tourney. Tell Madoc you don't belong with us, your betters. Do that and I'll save you."

I stare at him.

"All you have to do is give in," he says. "Easy."

I look over at my sister. It's my fault she's wet and scared. The river is cold, despite the heat of summer, the current strong. "And you'll save Taryn, too?"

"Oh, so you'll do what I say for her sake?" Cardan's gaze is hungry, devouring. "Does that feel noble?" He pauses, and in that silence, all I hear

is Taryn’s hitched breath. “Well, does it?”

I look at the nixies, watch them for any sign of movement. “Why don’t you tell me how you want me to feel?”

“Interesting.” He takes another step closer, squatting and regarding us from eye level. “There are so few children in Faerie that I’ve never seen one of us twinned. Is it like being doubled or more like being divided in half?”

I don’t answer.

Behind him, I see Nicasia thread her arm through Locke’s and whisper something to him. He gives her a scathing look, and she pouts. Maybe they’re annoyed that we’re not currently being eaten.

Cardan frowns. “Twin sister,” he says, turning to Taryn. A smile returns to his mouth, as though a terrible new idea has come to delight him. “Would you make a similar sacrifice? Let’s find out. I have a most generous offer for you. Climb up the bank and kiss me on both my cheeks. Once that’s done, so long as you don’t defend your sister by word or deed, I won’t hold you accountable for her defiance. Now, isn’t that a good bargain? But you get it only if you come to us now and leave her there to drown. Show her that she will always be alone.”

For a moment, Taryn stands still, as if frozen.

“Go,” I say. “I’ll be fine.”

It still hurts when she wades toward the bank. But of course she should go. She will be safe, and the price is nothing that matters.

One of the pale shapes detaches from the others and swims toward her, but my shadow in the water makes it hesitate. I mime throwing the rock, and it jolts a little. They like easy prey.

Valerian takes Taryn’s hand and helps her out of the water as if she were a great lady. Her dress is soaked, dripping as she moves, like the dresses of water sprites or sea nymphs. She presses her bluish lips to Cardan’s cheeks, one and then the other. She keeps her eyes closed, but his are open, watching me.

“Say ‘I forsake my sister Jude,’ ” Nicasia tells her. “ ‘I won’t help her. I don’t even like her.’ ”

Taryn looks in my direction, quick and apologetic. “I don’t have to say that. That wasn’t part of the bargain.” The others laugh.

Cardan’s boot parts the thistles and bulrushes. Locke starts to speak, but Cardan cuts him off. “Your sister abandoned you. See what we can do with

a few words? And everything can get so much worse. We can enchant you to run around on all fours, barking like a dog. We can curse you to wither away for want of a song you'll never hear again or a kind word from my lips. We're not mortal. We will break you. You're a fragile little thing; we'd hardly need to try. Give up."

"Never," I say.

He smiles, smug. "Never? Never is like forever—too big for mortals to comprehend."

The shape in the water remains where it is, probably because the presence of Cardan and the others makes it seem like I have friends who might defend me if I were attacked. I wait for Cardan's next move, watching him carefully. I hope I look defiant. He scrutinizes me for a long, awful moment.

"Think on us," he says to me. "All through your long, sodden, shameful walk home. Think on your answer. This is the least of what we can do." With that, he turns away from us, and after a moment, the others turn, too. I watch him go. I watch them all go.

When they're out of sight, I pull myself onto the bank, flopping onto my back in the mud next to where Taryn is standing. I take big, gulping breaths of air. The nixies begin to surface, looking at us with hungry, opalescent eyes. They peer at us through a patch of foxtails. One begins to crawl onto land.

I throw my rock. It doesn't come close to hitting, but the splash startles them into not coming closer.

Grunting, I force myself up to begin walking. And all through our walk home, while Taryn makes soft, sobbing sounds, I think about how much I hate them and how much I hate myself. And then I don't think about anything but lifting my wet boots, one step after another carrying me past the briars and fiddleheads and elms, past bushes of red-lipped cherries, barberries and damsons, past the wood sprites who nest in the rosebushes, home to a bath and a bed in a world that isn't mine and might never be.

My head is pounding when Vivienne shakes me awake. She jumps up onto the bed, kicking off the coverlets and making the frame groan. I press a cushion over my face and curl up on my side, trying to ignore her and go back to dreamless slumber.

"Get up, sleepyhead," she says, pulling back my blankets. "We're going to the mall."

I make a strangled noise and wave her away.

"Up!" she commands, leaping again.

"No," I moan, burrowing deeper in what's left of the blankets. "I've got to rehearse for the tournament."

Vivi stops bouncing, and I realize that it's no longer true. I don't have to fight. Except that I foolishly told Cardan I would never quit.

Which makes me remember the river and the nixies and Taryn.

How she was right, and I was magnificently, extravagantly wrong.

"I'll buy you coffee when we get there, coffee with chocolate and whipped cream." Vivi is relentless. "Come on. Taryn's waiting."

I half-stumble out of bed. Standing, I scratch my hip and glare. She gives me her most charming smile, and I find my annoyance fading, despite myself. Vivi is often selfish, but she's so cheerful about it and so

encouraging of cheerful selfishness in others that it’s easy to have fun with her.

I dress quickly in the modern clothes I keep in the very back of my wardrobe—jeans, an old gray sweater with a black star on it, and a pair of glittery silver Converse high-tops. I pull my hair into a slouchy knitted hat, and when I catch a glimpse of myself in the full-length mirror (carved so that it seems like a pair of bawdy fauns are on either side of the glass, leering), a different person is looking back at me.

Maybe the person I might have been if I’d been raised human.

Whoever that is.

When we were little, we used to talk about getting back to the human world all the time. Vivi kept saying that if she learned just a little more magic, we’d be able to go. We were going to find an abandoned mansion, and she was going to enchant birds to take care of us. They would buy us pizza and candy, and we would go to school only if we felt like it.

By the time Vivi learned how to travel there, though, reality had intruded on our plans. It turns out birds can’t really buy pizza, even if they’re enchanted.

I meet my sisters in front of Madoc’s stables, where silver-shod faerie horses are penned up beside enormous toads ready to be saddled and bridled and reindeer with broad antlers hung with bells. Vivi is wearing black jeans and a white shirt, mirrored sunglasses hiding her cat eyes. Taryn has on pink jeggings, a fuzzy cardigan, and a pair of ankle boots.

We try to imitate girls we see in the human world, girls in magazines, girls we see on movie screens in air-conditioned theaters, eating candy so sweet it makes my teeth ache. I don’t know what people think when they look at us. These clothes are a costume for me. I am playing dress-up in ignorance. I no more can guess the assumptions that go along with glittering sneakers than a child in a dragon costume knows what real dragons would make of the color of her scales.

Vivi picks stalks of ragwort that grow near the water troughs. After finding three that meet her specifications, she lifts the first and blows on it, saying, “Steed, rise and bear us where I command.”

With those words, she tosses the stalk to the ground, and it becomes a raw-boned yellow pony with emerald eyes and a mane that resembles lacy foliage. It makes an odd keening neigh. She throws down two more stalks,

and moments later three ragwort ponies snort the air and snuffle at the ground. They look a little like sea horses and will ride over land and sky, according to Vivi's command, keeping their seeming for hours before collapsing back into weeds.

It turns out that passing between Faerie and the mortal world isn't all that difficult. Faerie exists beside and below mortal towns, in the shadows of mortal cities, and at their rotten, derelict, worm-eaten centers. Faeries live in hills and valleys and barrows, in alleys and abandoned mortal buildings. Vivi isn't the only faerie from our islands to sneak across the sea and into the human world with some regularity, although most don mortal guises to mess with people. Less than a month ago, Valerian was bragging about campers he and his friends had tricked into feasting with them, gorging on rotten leaves enchanted to look like delicacies.

I climb onto my ragwort steed and wrap my hands around the creature's neck. There is always a moment when it begins to move that I can't help grinning. There is something about the sheer impossibility of it, the magnificence of the woods streaking by and the way the ragwort hooves kick up gravel as they leap up into the air, that gives me an electric rush of pure adrenaline.

I swallow the howl clawing up my throat.

We ride over the cliffs and then the sea, watching mermaids leap in the spangled waves and selkies rolling along the surf. Past the fog perpetually surrounding the islands and concealing them from mortals. And then on to the shoreline, past Two Lights State Park, a golf course, and a jetport. We touch down in a small tree-covered patch across the road from the Maine Mall. Vivi's shirt flutters in the wind as she lands. Taryn and I dismount. With a few words from Vivi, the ragwort steeds become just three half-wilted weeds among others.

"Remember where we parked," Taryn says with a grin, and we start toward the mall.

Vivi loves this place. She loves to drink mango smoothies, try on hats, and buy whatever we want with acorns she enchants to pass as money. Taryn doesn't love it the way Vivi does, but she has fun. When I am here, though, I feel like a ghost.

We strut through the JCPenney as though we're the most dangerous things around. But when I see human families all together, especially

families with sticky-mouthed, giggling little sisters, I don't like the way I feel.

Angry.

I don't imagine myself back in a life like theirs; what I imagine is going over there and scaring them until they cry.

I would never, of course.

I mean, I don't think I would.

Taryn seems to notice the way my gaze snags on a child whining to her mother. Unlike me, Taryn is adaptable. She knows the right things to say. She'd be okay if she were thrust back into this world. She's okay now. She will fall in love, just as she said. She will metamorphose into a wife or consort and raise faerie children who will adore and outlive her. The only thing holding her back is me.

I am *so glad* she can't guess my thoughts.

"So," Vivi says. "We're here because you both could use some cheering up. So cheer up."

I look over at Taryn and take a deep breath, ready to apologize. I don't know if that's what Vivi had in mind, but it's what I've known I had to do since I got out of bed. "I'm sorry," I blurt out.

"You're probably mad," Taryn says at the same time.

"At you?" I am astonished.

Taryn droops. "I swore to Cardan that I wouldn't help you, even though I came with you that day to help."

I shake my head vehemently. "Really, Taryn, you're the one who should be angry that I got you tossed into the water in the first place. Getting yourself out of there was the smart thing to do. I would never be mad about that."

"Oh," she says. "Okay."

"Taryn told me about the prank you played on the prince," Vivi says. I see myself reflected in her sunglasses, doubled, quadrupled with Taryn beside me. "Pretty good, but now you're going to have to do something much worse. I've got ideas."

"No!" Taryn says with vehemence. "Jude doesn't need to do *anything*. She was just upset about Madoc and the tournament. If she goes back to ignoring them, they'll go back to ignoring her, too. Maybe not at first, but eventually."

I bite my lip because I don't think that's true.

"Forget Madoc. Knighthood would have been boring anyway," Vivi says, effectively dismissing the thing I've been working toward for years. I sigh. It's annoying, but also reassuring that she doesn't think it's that big a deal, when the loss has felt overwhelming to me.

"So what do you want to do?" I ask Vivi to avoid any more of this discussion. "Are we seeing a movie? Do you want to try on lipsticks? Don't forget you promised me coffee."

"I want you to meet my girlfriend," Vivienne says, and I remember the pink-haired girl in the strip of photos. "She asked me to move in with her."

"Here?" I ask, as though there could be any other place.

"The mall?" Vivi laughs at our expressions. "We're going to meet her here today but probably find a different place to *live*. Heather doesn't know Faerie exists, so don't mention it, okay?"

When Taryn and I were ten, Vivi learned how to make ragwort horses. We ran away from Madoc's house a few days later. At a gas station, Vivi enchanted a random woman to take us home with her.

I still remember the woman's blank face as she drove. I wanted to make her smile, but no matter what funny faces I pulled, her expression didn't change. We spent the night in her house, sick after having ice cream for dinner. I cried myself to sleep, clinging to a weeping Taryn.

After that, Vivi found us a motel room with a stove, and we learned how to cook macaroni and cheese from the package. We made coffee in the coffeepot because we remembered how our old house had smelled like it. We watched television and swam in the pool with other kids staying in the motel.

I hated it.

We lived that way for two weeks before Taryn and I begged Vivi to take us home, to take us back to Faerie. We missed our beds, we missed the food we were used to, we missed magic.

I think it broke Vivi's heart to return, but she did it. And she stayed. Whatever else I can say about Vivi, when it really mattered, she stuck by us.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised that she didn't plan to stay forever.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Taryn demands.

"I *am* telling you. I just did," Vivi says, leading us past stores with looping images of video games, past gleaming displays of bikinis and

flowing maxi dresses, past cheese-injected pretzels and stores with counters full of gleaming, heart-shaped diamonds promising true love. Strollers stream past, groups of teenage boys in jerseys, elderly couples holding hands.

“You should have said something sooner,” says Taryn, hands on her hips.

“Here’s my plan to cheer you up,” Vivi says. “We all move to the human world. Move in with Heather. Jude doesn’t have to worry about knighthood, and Taryn doesn’t have to throw herself away on some silly faerie boy.”

“Does Heather know about this plan?” Taryn asks skeptically.

Vivi shakes her head, smiling.

“Sure,” I say, trying to make a joke of it. “Except that I have no marketable skills other than swinging around a sword and making up riddles, neither of which probably pay all that well.”

“The mortal world is where we grew up,” Vivi insists, climbing onto a bench and walking the length of it, acting as though it were a stage. She pushes her sunglasses up onto her head. “You’d get used to it again.”

“Where *you* grew up.” She was nine when we were taken; she remembers so much more about being human than we do. It’s unfair, since she’s also the one with magic.

“The Folk are going to keep treating you like crap,” Vivi says, and hops down in front of us, cat eyes flashing. A lady with a baby carriage swerves to avoid us.

“What do you mean?” I look away from Vivi, concentrating on the pattern of the tiles under my feet.

“Oriana acts like you two being mortal is some kind of awful surprise that gets sprung on her all over again every morning,” she says. “And Madoc killed our parents, so that sucks. And then there are the jerks at school that you don’t like to talk about.”

“I was just talking about those jerks,” I say, not giving her the satisfaction of being shocked by what she said about our parents. She acts like we don’t remember, like there’s some way I am ever going to forget. She acts like it’s her personal tragedy and hers alone.

“And you didn’t like it.” Vivi looks immensely pleased with herself for that particular riposte. “Did you really think that being a knight would make everything better?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

Vivi swings on Taryn. “What about you?”

“Faerie is all we know.” Taryn holds up a hand to forestall any more argument. “Here, we wouldn’t have anything. There’d be no balls and no magic and no—”

“Well, I think *I’ d* like it here,” Vivi snaps, and stalks off ahead of us, toward the Apple Store.

We’ve talked about it before, of course, how Vivi thinks we’re stupid for not being able to resist the intensity of Faerie, for desiring to stay in a place of such danger. Maybe growing up the way we have, bad things feel good to us. Or maybe we are stupid in the exact same way as every other idiot mortal who’s pined away for another bite of goblin fruit. Maybe it doesn’t matter.

A girl is standing in front of the entrance, playing around on her phone. *The* girl, I assume. Heather is small, with faded pink hair and brown skin. She’s wearing a t-shirt with a hand-drawn design across the front. There are pen stains on her fingers. I realize abruptly that she might be the artist who drew the comics I’ve seen Vivi pore over.

I begin a curtsy before I remember myself and awkwardly stick out a hand. “I’m Vivi’s sister Jude,” I say. “And this is Taryn.”

The girl shakes my hand. Her palm is warm, her grip nearly nonexistent.

It’s funny how Vivi, who tried so hard to escape being anything like Madoc, wound up falling in love with a human girl, as Madoc did.

“I’m Heather,” the girl says. “It’s great to meet you. Vee almost never talks about her family.”

Taryn and I glance at each other. *Vee?*

“You want to sit down or something?” Heather says, nodding toward the food court.

“Somebody owes me coffee,” I say pointedly to Vivi.

We order and sit and drink. Heather tells us that she’s in community college, studying art. She tells us about comics she likes and bands she’s into. We dodge awkward questions. We lie. When Vivi gets up to throw away our trash, Heather asks us if she’s the first girlfriend Vivi has let us meet.

Taryn nods. “That must mean she likes you a lot.”

“So can I visit your place now? My parents are ready to buy a toothbrush for Vee. How come I don’t get to meet hers?”

I almost snort my mocha. “Did she tell you anything about our family?”

Heather sighs. “No.”

“Our dad is really conservative,” I say.

A boy with spiky black hair and a wallet chain passes us, smiling in my direction. I have no idea what he wants. Maybe he knows Heather. She’s not paying attention. I don’t smile back.

“Does he even know Vee is bi?” Heather asks, astonished, but then Vivi returns to the table, so we don’t have to keep making up stuff. Liking both girls and boys is the only thing in this scenario Madoc *wouldn’t* be upset with Vivi about.

After that, the four of us wander the mall, trying on purple lipsticks and eating sour apple candy slices crusted in sugar that turn my tongue green. I delight in the chemicals that would doubtless sicken all the lords and ladies at the Court.

Heather seems nice. Heather has no idea what she’s getting herself into.

We say polite farewells near Newbury Comics. Vivi watches three kids picking out bobblehead figurines, her gaze avid. I wonder what she thinks as she moves among humans. At moments like that, she seems like a wolf learning the patterns of sheep. But when she kisses Heather, she is entirely sincere.

“I am glad you lied for me,” Vivi says as we retrace our steps through the mall.

“You’re going to have to tell her eventually,” I say. “If you’re serious. If you’re really moving to the mortal world to be with her.”

“And when you do, she’s still going to want to meet Madoc,” Taryn says, although I can see why Vivi wants to avoid that for as long as possible.

Vivi shakes her head. “Love is a noble cause. How can anything done in the service of a noble cause be wrong?”

Taryn chews her lip.

Before we leave, we stop by CVS, and I pick up tampons. Every time I buy them, it’s a reminder that while the Folk can look like us, they are a species apart. Even Vivi is a species apart. I divide the package in half and give the other portion to Taryn.

I know what you’re wondering. No, they don’t bleed once a month; yes, they do bleed. Annually. Sometimes less frequently than that. Yes, they

have solutions—padding, mostly—and yes, those solutions suck. Yes, everything about it is embarrassing.

We start to cut across the parking lot toward our ragwort stalks when a guy about our age touches my arm, warm fingers closing just above my wrist.

“Hey, sweetheart.” I have an impression of a too-big black shirt, jeans, a chain wallet, spiky hair. The glint of a cheap knife in his boot. “I saw you before, and I was just wondering—”

I am turning before I can think, my fist cracking into his jaw. My booted foot hits his gut as he falls, rolling him over the pavement. I blink and find myself standing there, staring down at a kid who is gasping for air and starting to cry. My boot is raised to kick him in the throat, to crush his windpipe. The mortals standing around him are staring at me in horror. My nerves are jangling, but it’s an eager jangle. I am ready for more.

I think he was flirting with me.

I don’t even remember deciding to hit him.

“Come on!” Taryn jerks my arm, and all three of us run. Someone shouts.

I look over my shoulder. One of the boy’s friends has given chase. “Bitch!” he shouts. “Crazy bitch! Milo is bleeding!”

Vivi whispers a few words and makes a motion behind us. As she does, the crabgrass begins to grow, pushing gaps in the asphalt wider. The boy comes to a halt as something rushes by him, a look of confusion on his face. Pixie-led, they call it. He wanders through a row of cars as though he has no idea where he’s going. Unless he turns his clothes inside out, which I am fairly confident he doesn’t know to do, he’ll never find us.

We stop near the edge of the lot, and Vivi immediately begins to giggle. “Madoc would be so proud—his little girl, remembering all her training,” she says. “Staving off the terrifying possibility of romance.”

I am too stunned to say anything. Hitting him was the most honest thing I’ve done in a long time. I feel better than great. I feel *nothing*, a glorious emptiness.

“See,” I tell Vivi. “I can’t go back to the world. Look what I would do to it.”

To that, she has no response.

I think about what I did all the way home and then, again, at school. A lecturer from a Court near the coast explains how things wither and die. Cardan gives me a significant look as she explains decomposition, rot. But what I am thinking about is the stillness I felt when I hit that boy. That and the Summer Tournament tomorrow.

I dreamed of my triumph there. None of Cardan's threats would have kept me from wearing the gold braid and fighting as hard as I could. Now, though, his threats are the only reason I have to fight—the sheer perverse glory of not backing down.

When we break to eat, Taryn and I climb up a tree to eat cheese and oatcakes slathered with chokecherry jelly. Fand calls up to me, wanting to know why I didn't attend the rehearsal for the mock war.

"I forgot," I call back to her, which is not particularly believable, but I don't care.

"But you're going to fight tomorrow?" she asks. If I pull out, Fand will have to rearrange teams.

Taryn gives me a hopeful look, as though I may come to my senses.

"I'll be there," I say. My pride compels me.

Lessons are almost over when I notice Taryn, standing beside Cardan, near a circle of thorn trees, weeping. I must not have been paying attention, must have gotten too involved in packing up our books and things. I didn't even see Cardan take my sister aside. I know she would have gone, though, no matter the excuse. She still believes that if we do what they want, they'll get bored and leave us alone. Maybe she's right, but I don't care.

Tears spill over her cheeks.

There is such a deep well of rage inside me.

You're no killer.

I leave my books and cross the grass toward them. Cardan half-turns, and I shove him so hard that his back hits one of the trees. His eyes go wide.

"I don't know what you said to her, but don't you ever go near my sister again," I tell him, my hand still on the front of his velvet doublet. "You gave her your word."

I can feel the eyes of all the other students on me. Everyone's breath is drawn.

For a moment, Cardan just stares at me with stupid, crow-black eyes. Then one corner of his mouth curls. "Oh," he says. "You're going to regret doing that."

I don't think he realizes just how angry I am or how good it feels, for once, to give up on regrets.

Taryn won’t tell me what Prince Cardan said to her. She insists that it had nothing to do with me, that he wasn’t actually breaking his promise not to hold her accountable for my bad behavior, that I should forget about her and worry about myself.

“Jude, give it up.” She sits in front of the fire in her bedroom, drinking a cup of nettle tea from a clay mug shaped like a snake, its tail coiling to make the handle. She has on her dressing gown, scarlet to match the flames in the grate. Sometimes when I look at her, it seems impossible that her face is also mine. She looks soft, pretty, like a girl in a painting. Like a girl who fits inside her own skin.

“Just tell me what he said,” I press.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Taryn says. “I know what I’m doing.”

“And what’s that?” I ask her, my eyebrows lifting, but she only sighs.

We’ve gone three rounds like this already. I keep thinking of the lazy blink of Cardan’s lashes over his coal-bright eyes. He looked gleeful, gloating, as though my fist tightening on his shirt was exactly what he would have wished. As though, if I struck him, it would be because he had made me do it.

“I can annoy you in the hills and also the dales,” I say, poking her in the arm. “I will chase you from crag to crag across all three islands until you

tell me *something*."

"I think we could both bear it better if no one else had to see," she says, then takes a long pull of her tea.

"What?" I am surprised into not knowing what to say in return. "What do you mean?"

"I *mean*, I think I could stand being teased and being made to cry if you didn't know about it." She gives me a steady look, as though evaluating how much truth I can handle. "I can't just pretend my day was fine with you as a witness to what really happened. Sometimes it makes me not like you."

"That's not fair!" I exclaim.

She shrugs. "I know. That's why I'm telling you. But what Cardan said to me doesn't matter, and I want to pretend it didn't happen, so I need you to pretend along with me. No reminders, no questions, no cautions."

Stung, I stand and walk to her fireplace mantel, leaning my head against the carved stone. I can't count the number of times she's told me that messing with Cardan and his friends is stupid. And yet, given what she's saying now, whatever made her cry this afternoon has nothing to do with me. Which means she's gotten into some kind of trouble all on her own.

Taryn might have a lot of advice to give; I am not sure she's taking all of it.

"So what *do* you want me to do?" I ask.

"I want you to fix things with him," she says. "Prince Cardan's got all the power. There's no winning against him. No matter how brave or clever or even cruel you are, Jude. End this, before you get really hurt."

I look at her uncomprehendingly. Avoiding Cardan's wrath now seems impossible. That ship has sailed—and burned up in the harbor. "I can't," I tell her.

"You heard what Prince Cardan said by the river—he just wants you to *give up*. It's a blow to his pride, and it hurts his status, you acting like you're not afraid of him." She takes my arm at the wrist, pulling me close. I can smell the sharp scent of herbs on her breath. "Tell him that he's won and you've lost. They're just words. You don't have to mean them."

I shake my head.

"Don't fight him tomorrow," she continues.

"I'm not withdrawing from the tournament," I tell her.

"Even if it wins you nothing but more woe?" she asks.

“Even then,” I say.

“Do something else,” she insists. “Find a way. Fix it before it’s too late.”

I think of all the things she won’t say, all the things I wish I knew. But since she wants me to pretend everything is fine, all I can do is swallow my questions and leave her to her fire.

In my room, I find my tournament outfit spread out on my bed, scented with verbena and lavender.

It’s a slightly padded tunic stitched with metallic thread. The pattern is of a crescent moon turned on its side like a cup, with a droplet of red falling from one corner and a dagger beneath the whole. Madoc’s crest.

I cannot put on that tunic tomorrow and fail, not without bringing disgrace on my household. And although embarrassing Madoc might give me a contrary pleasure, a small revenge for denying me knighthood, I’d embarrass myself, too.

What I should do is go back to keeping my head down. Be decent, but not memorable. Let Cardan and his friends show off. Save up my skill to surprise the Court when Madoc gives me permission to seek a knighthood. If that ever happens.

That’s what I *should* do.

I knock the tunic to the floor and climb under the coverlets, pulling them up over my head so that I am slightly smothered. So that I breathe in my own warm breath. I fall asleep like that.

In the afternoon, when I rise, the garment is wrinkled, and I have no one to blame but myself.

“You are a foolish child,” Tatterfell says, scraping my hair into tight warrior braids. “With a memory like that of a sparrow.”

On my way to the kitchens, I pass Madoc in the hall. He is dressed all in green, his mouth pulled into a grim line.

“Hold a moment,” he says.

I do.

He frowns. “I know what it is to be young and hungry for glory.”

I bite my lip and say nothing. After all, he hasn’t asked me a question. We stand there, watching each other. His cat eyes narrow. There are so many unsaid things between us—so many reasons we can only be something *like* father and daughter, but never fully inhabit our roles. “You will come to understand this is for the best,” he says finally. “Enjoy your battle.”

I make a deep bow and head for the door, my trip to the kitchens abandoned. All I want to do is get away from the house, from the reminder that there is no place for me at the Court, no place for me in Faerie.

What you lack is nothing to do with experience.

The Summer Tournament is being held on the edge of a cliff on Ins-weal, the Isle of Woe. It’s far enough that I take a mount, a pale gray horse stabled beside a toad. The toad watches me with golden eyes as I saddle the mare and throw myself up onto her back. I arrive at the grounds out of sorts, slightly late, anxious, and hungry.

A crowd is already gathering around the tented box where the High King Eldred and the rest of the royals will sit. Long cream-colored banners whip through the air, flying Eldred’s symbol—a tree that is half white flowers and half thorns, roots dangling beneath it and a crown atop. The uniting of the Seelie Courts, the Unseelie Courts, and the wild fey, under one crown. The dream of the Greenbriar line.

The decadent eldest son, Prince Balekin, is sprawled in a carved chair, three attendants around him. His sister Princess Rhyia, the huntress, sits beside him. Her eyes are all on the potential combatants, readying themselves on the grounds.

A wave of panicky frustration comes over me at the sight of her intent expression. I so badly wanted her to choose me to be one of her knights. And though she can’t now, a sudden awful fear that I couldn’t have impressed her comes over me. Maybe Madoc was right. Maybe I lack the instinct for dealing death.

If I don’t try too hard today, at least I never need know if I would have been good enough.

My group is to go first because we are the youngest. Still in training, using wooden swords instead of live steel, unlike those who follow us. Bouts of fighting will last the whole day, broken up by bardic performances, a few feats of clever magic, displays of archery, and other skills. I can smell spiced wine in the air, but not yet that other perfume of tournaments—fresh blood.

Fand is organizing us into rows, handing out armbands in silver and gold. Her blue skin is even more blazingly cerulean under the bright sky. Her armor is varying shades of blue as well, from oceanic to berry, with her green sash cutting across the breastplate. She will stand out no matter how she fares, which is a calculated risk. If she does well, the audience cannot fail to notice. But she'd better do well.

As I approach the other students with their practice swords, I hear my name whispered. Unnerved, I look around, only to realize I am being scrutinized in a new way. Taryn and I are always noticeable, being mortal, but what makes us stand out is also what makes us unworthy of much regard. Today, however, that's not so. The children of Faerie seem to be holding a single indrawn breath, waiting to see what my punishment will be for putting hands on Cardan the day before. Waiting to see what I am going to do next.

I look across the field at Cardan and his friends, with silver on their arms. Cardan is wearing silver on his chest, too, a plate of gleaming steel that hooks over his shoulders and seems more ornamental than protective. Valerian smirks at me.

I do not give him the satisfaction of smirking back.

Fand gives me a gold band and tells me where to stand. There are to be three rounds in the mock war and two sides. Each side has a cloak of hide to protect—one, that of a yellow deer; the other, that of silvery fox fur.

I drink some water out of a pewter carafe set out for participants and begin to warm up. My stomach is sour with the lack of food, but I no longer feel hungry. I feel sick, eaten up with nerves. I try to ignore everything but the exercises I move through to limber up my muscles.

And then it is time. We troop onto the field and salute the seat of the High King, although Eldred has not yet arrived. The crowd is thinner than it will be closer to sunset. Prince Dain is there, though, with Madoc beside him. Princess Elowyn strums a lute thoughtfully. Vivi and Taryn have come

to watch, although I see neither Oriana nor Oak. Vivi gestures with a kebab of glistening fruit, making Princess Rhyia laugh.

Taryn watches me intently, as though trying to warn me with her gaze.

Fix it.

All through the first battle, I fight defensively. I avoid Cardan. Nor do I come near Nicasia, Valerian, or Locke, even when Valerian knocks Fand to the dirt. Even when Valerian rips down our deer hide.

Still, I do nothing.

Then we are called to the field for the second battle.

Cardan walks behind me. “You are docile today. Did your sister admonish you? She desires our approval very much.” One of his booted feet toes the clover-covered ground, kicking up a clod. “I imagine that if I asked, she’d roll with me right here until we turned her white gown green and then thank me for the honor of my favor.” He smiles, going in for the kill, leaning toward me as if confiding a secret. “Not that I’d be the first to green gown her.”

My good intentions evaporate on the wind. My blood is on fire, boiling in my veins. I do not have much power, but here is what I have—I can force his hand. Cardan might want to hurt me, but I can make him want to hurt me worse. We’re supposed to play at war. When they call us to our places, I play. I play as viciously as possible. My practice sword cracks against Cardan’s ridiculous chest plate. My shoulder bangs against Valerian’s shoulder so hard that he staggers back. I attack again and again, knocking down anyone wearing a silver armband. When the mock war is over, my eye is blackened and both of my knees are skinned and the gold side has won the second and third battles.

You’re no killer, Madoc said.

Right now I feel that I could be.

The crowd applauds, and it is as if I have suddenly woken from a dream. I forgot about them. A pixie tosses flower petals at us. From the stands, Vivi salutes me with a goblet of something as Princess Rhyia applauds politely. Madoc is no longer in the royal box. Balekin is gone, too. The High King Eldred is there, though, sitting on a slightly elevated platform, speaking with Dain, his expression remote.

I start to tremble all over, the adrenaline draining out of me. Courtiers, waiting for better battles, study my bruises and evaluate my prowess. No

one seems particularly impressed. I have done my best, have fought my hardest, and it wasn't enough. Madoc didn't even stay to watch.

My shoulders slump.

Worse, Cardan is waiting for me when I get off the field. I am struck suddenly by his height, by the arrogant sneer he wears like a crown. He would seem like a prince even dressed in rags. Cardan grabs my face, fingers splayed against my neck. His breath is against my cheek. His other hand grabs my hair, winding it into a rope. "Do you know what mortal means? It means *born to die*. It means *deserving of death*. That's what you are, what defines you—dying. And yet here you stand, determined to oppose me even as you rot away from the inside out, you corrupt, corrosive mortal creature. Tell me how that is. Do you really think you can win against me? Against a prince of Faerie?"

I swallow hard. "No," I say.

His black eyes simmer with rage. "So you're not completely lacking in some small amount of animal cunning. Good. Now, beg my forgiveness."

I take a step back and tug, trying to wrench free of his grasp. He holds on to my braid, staring down into my face with hungry eyes and a small, awful smile. Then he opens his hand, letting me stagger free. Individual strands of hair flutter through the air.

On the periphery of my vision, I see Taryn standing with Locke, near where other knights are donning their armor. She looks at me pleadingly, as though she is the one who needs to be saved.

"Get down on your knees," Cardan says, looking insufferably pleased with himself. His fury has transmuted into gloating. "Beg. Make it pretty. Flowery. Worthy of me."

The other children of the Gentry are standing around in their padded tunics with their practice swords, watching, hoping my downfall will be amusing. This is the show they've been expecting since I stood up to him. This isn't a mock war; this is the real thing.

"Beg?" I echo.

For a moment, he looks surprised, but that's quickly replaced by even greater malice. "You *defied* me. More than once. Your only hope is to throw yourself on my mercy in front of everyone. Do it, or I will keep on hurting you until there is nothing left to hurt."

I think of the dark shapes of the nixies in the water and the boy at the revel, howling over his torn wing. I think of Taryn's tearstained face. I think of how Rhyia would never have chosen me, of how Madoc didn't even wait to see the conclusion of the battle.

There's no shame in surrender. As Taryn said, they're just words. I don't have to mean them. I can lie.

I start to lower myself to the ground. This will be over quickly, every word will taste like bile, and then it will be over.

When I open my mouth, though, nothing comes out.

I can't do it.

Instead, I shake my head at the thrill running through me at the sheer lunacy of what I'm about to do. It's the thrill of leaping without being able to see the ground below you, right before you realize that's called *falling*. "You think because you can humiliate me, you can control me?" I say, looking him in those black eyes. "Well, I think you're an idiot. Since we started being tutored together, you've gone out of your way to make me feel like I'm less than you. And to coddle your ego, I have made myself less. I have made myself small, I have kept my head down. But it wasn't enough to make you leave Taryn and me alone, so I'm not going to do that anymore.

"I am going to keep on defying you. I am going to shame you with my defiance. You remind me that I am a mere mortal and you are a prince of Faerie. Well, let me remind you that means you have much to lose and I have nothing. You may win in the end, you may ensorcell me and hurt me and humiliate me, but I will make sure you lose everything I can take from you on the way down. I promise you this"—I throw his own words back at him—"*this is the least of what I can do*."

Cardan looks at me as though he's never seen me before. He looks at me as though no one has ever spoken to him like this. Maybe no one has.

I turn from him and begin walking, half-expecting Cardan to grab my shoulder and throw me to the ground, half-expecting him to find the rowan berry necklace at my throat, snap it, and speak the words that will make me crawl back to him, begging despite all my big talk. But he says nothing. I feel his gaze on my back, pricking the hairs on my neck. It is all I can do not to run.

I dare not look toward Taryn and Locke, but I catch a glimpse of Nicasia staring at me, openmouthed. Valerian looks furious, his hands fisted at his sides in mute rage.

I stagger past the tournament tents to a stone fountain, where I splash my face with water. I bend down, starting to clean the gravel from my knees. My legs feel stiff, and I am shaking all over.

“Are you all right?” Locke asks, gazing down with his tawny fox eyes. I didn’t even hear him behind me.

I am not.

I am not all right, but he can’t know that, and he shouldn’t be asking.

“What do you care?” I say, spitting the words out. The way he’s looking at me makes me feel more pathetic than ever.

He leans against the fountain, letting a slow, lazy smile grow on his mouth. “It’s funny, that’s all.”

“Funny?” I echo, furious. “You think that was funny?”

He shakes his head, still smiling. “No. It’s funny how you get under his skin.”

At first, I’m not sure I heard him right. I almost ask whom he’s talking about, because I can’t quite believe he’s admitting that high and mighty Cardan is affected by anything. “Like a splinter?” I say.

“Of iron. No one else bothers him quite the way that you do.” He picks up a towel and wets it, then kneels down beside me and carefully wipes my face. I suck in a breath when the cold cloth touches the sensitive part of my eye, but he is far gentler than I would have been to myself. His face is solemn and focused on what he’s doing. He doesn’t seem to notice my studying him, his long face and sharp chin, his curling red-brown hair, the way his eyelashes catch the light.

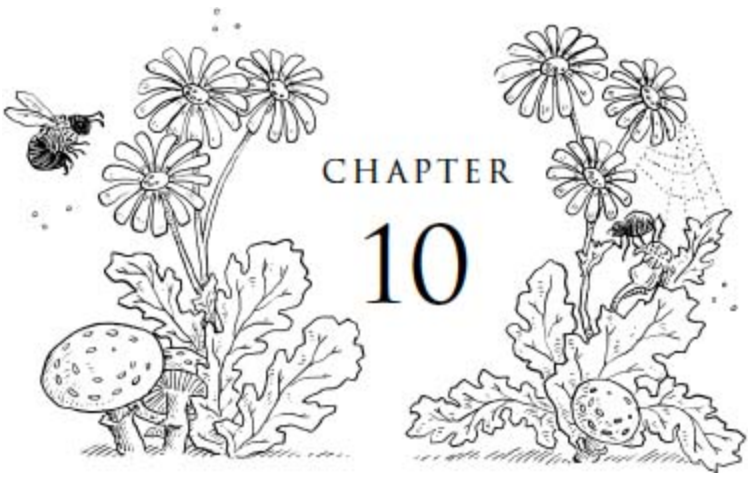
Then he does notice. He’s looking at me, and I’m looking back at him, and it’s the strangest thing, because I thought Locke would never notice anyone like me. He is noticing, though. He’s smiling like he did that night at the Court, as though we shared a secret. He’s smiling as if we’re sharing another one.

“Keep it up,” he says.

I wonder at those words. Can he really mean them?

As I make my way back to the tournament and my sisters, I can’t stop thinking of Cardan’s shocked face, nor can I stop considering Locke’s

smile. I am not altogether sure which is more thrilling and which more dangerous.



CHAPTER 10

The rest of the Summer Tournament goes by in a blur. Swordsfolk go toe-to-toe against one another in single combat, fighting for the honor of impressing the High King and his Court. Ogres and foxkin, goblins and gwyllions, all engaged in the deadly dance of battle.

After a few rounds, Vivi wants us to push through the crowd and buy more fruit skewers. I keep trying to catch Taryn's eye, but she won't allow it. I want to know if she's angry. I want to ask what Locke said to her when they were standing together, although that might be the exact sort of question she would forbid.

But the conversation with Locke couldn't have been the humiliating kind, the kind she tries to pretend away, could it? Not when he practically told me he delighted in Cardan's being brought low. Which makes me think of the other question I can't ask Taryn.

Not that I' d be the first to green gown her. Faeries can't lie. Cardan couldn't have said it if he didn't believe it to be true—but why would he think that?

Vivi knocks her skewer against mine, bringing me out of my reverie. "To our clever Jude, who made the Folk remember why they stay in their barrows and hills, for fear of mortal ferocity."

A tall man with the floppy ears of a rabbit and a mane of walnut-brown hair turns to give Vivi a dirty look. She grins at him. I shake my head, pleased by her toast, even if it’s wild exaggeration. Even if I impressed no one but her.

“Would that Jude was just a bit less clever,” Taryn says under her breath.

I turn to her, but she has moved away.

When we get back to the arena, Princess Rhyia is readying herself for her bout. She holds a thin sword, very much like a long pin, and stabs at the empty air in preparation for an opponent. Her two lovers call out encouragements.

Cardan reemerges in the royal box, wearing loose white linen and a flower crown all of roses. He ignores the High King and Prince Dain and flops down in a chair beside Prince Balekin, with whom he exchanges a few sharp words that I dearly wish I were close enough to hear. Princess Caelia has arrived for her sister’s bout and applauds wildly when Rhyia walks out onto the clover.

Madoc never returns.

I ride home alone. Vivi heads off with Rhyia after she wins her bout—they are going hunting in the nearby woods. Taryn agrees to accompany them, but I am too weary and too sore and too on edge.

In the kitchens of Madoc’s house, I toast cheese over a fire and spread it on bread. Sitting on the stoop with that and a mug of tea, I watch the sun go down as I eat my lunch.

The cook, a trow named Wattle, ignores me and continues magicking the parsnips to chop themselves.

When I am done, I brush crumbs from my cheeks and head for my room.

Gnarbone, a servant with long ears and a tail that drags on the ground, stops in the hall when he sees me. He’s carrying a tray of thimble-size acorn cups and a silvery decanter of what smells like blackberry wine in his large, clawed hands. His livery is pulled tight across his chest, and pieces of fur stick out of the gaps.

“Oh, you are at home,” he says, a growl in his voice that makes him seem menacing no matter how benign the words he speaks. Despite myself, I can’t help thinking of the guard who bit off the tip of my finger. Gnarbone’s teeth could snap off my whole hand.

I nod.

“The prince is asking for you downstairs.”

Cardan, here? My heartbeat speeds. I can’t think. “Where?”

Gnarbone looks surprised by my reaction. “In Madoc’s study. I was just bringing him this—”

I grab the tray out of his hands and head down the stairs, intent on getting rid of Cardan as quickly as I can, any way that I can. The last thing I need is for Madoc to overhear my being disrespectful and decide I’ll never belong at the Court. He is a servant of the Greenbriar line, sworn as surely as anyone. He would not like my being at odds with even the least of the princes.

I fly down the stairs and kick open the door to Madoc’s study. The knob crashes into a bookshelf as I stride into the room, plunking down the tray with enough force to make the cups dance.

Prince Dain has several books lying open on the library table in front of him. Golden curls fall over his eyes, and the collar of his pale blue doublet is open, showing a heavy silver torque at his throat. I halt, aware of the colossal mistake I have made.

He raises both eyebrows. “Jude. I didn’t expect you to be in such a rush.”

I sink into a low bow and hope he will think me only clumsy. Fear gnaws at me, sharp and sudden. Could Cardan have sent him? Is he here to punish me for my insolence? I can think of no other reason that honored and honorable Prince Dain, soon to be the ruler of Faerie, would ask for me.

“Uh,” I say, panic tripping my tongue. With relief, I remember the tray and indicate the decanter. “Here. This is for you, my lord.”

He picks up an acorn and pours a little of the thick black liquid into the cup. “Will you drink with me?”

I shake my head, feeling completely out of my depth. “It will go straight to my head.”

That makes him laugh. “Well then, keep me company a time.”

“Of course.” That, I cannot possibly refuse. Alighting on an arm of one of the green leather chairs, I feel my heart thud dully. “May I get you

anything else?” I ask, not sure how to proceed.

He lifts his acorn cup, as if in salute. “I have refreshment enough. What I require is conversation. Perhaps you can tell me what made you storm in here. Who did you think I was?”

“No one,” I say quickly. My thumb rubs over my ring finger, over the smooth skin of the missing tip.

He sits up straighter, as though I am suddenly much more interesting. “I thought maybe one of my brothers was bothering you.”

I shake my head. “Nothing like that.”

“It’s shocking,” he says, as though he’s giving me some great compliment. “I know humans can lie, but to watch you do it is incredible. Do it again.”

I feel my face heat. “I wasn’t … I …”

“Do it again,” he repeats gently. “Don’t be afraid.”

Only a fool wouldn’t be, despite his words. Prince Dain came here when Madoc was not at home. He asked for me specifically. He implied he knew about Cardan—perhaps he glimpsed us after the mock war, Cardan jerking my head by my braid. But what does Dain want?

I am breathing too shallowly, too fast.

Dain, about to be crowned the High King, has the power to grant me a place in the Court, the power to gainsay Madoc and make me a knight. If only I could impress him, he could give me everything I want. Everything I thought I lost my shot at.

I draw myself up and look into the silvered gray of his eyes. “My name is Jude Duarte. I was born on November thirteenth, 2001. My favorite color is green. I like fog and sad ballads and chocolate-covered raisins. I can’t swim. Now tell me, which part was the lie? Did I lie at all? Because what’s so great about lying is the not knowing.”

I realize abruptly that he might not take any vow particularly seriously from me after that little performance. He looks pleased, though, smiling at me as if he’d found a rough ruby lying in the dirt. “Now,” he says, “tell me how your father uses that little talent of yours.”

I blink, confused.

“Really? He doesn’t. What a shame.” The prince tilts his head to study me. “Tell me what you dream of, Jude Duarte, if that’s your true name. Tell me what you want.”

My heart hammers in my chest, and I feel a little light-headed, a little dizzy. Surely it can't be this easy. Prince Dain, soon to be the High King of all Faerie, asking me what I want. I barely dare answer, and yet I must.

"I—I want to be your knight," I stammer.

His eyebrows go up. "Unexpected," he says. "And pleasing. What else?"

"I don't understand." I twist my hands together so he can't see how they are shaking.

"Desire is an odd thing. As soon as it's sated, it transmutes. If we receive golden thread, we desire the golden needle. And so, Jude Duarte, I am asking you what you would want next if I made you part of my company."

"To serve you," I say, still confused. "To pledge my sword to the crown."

He waves off my answer. "No, tell me what you *want*. Ask me for something. Something you've never asked from anyone."

Make me no longer mortal, I think, and then am horrified at myself. I don't want to want that, especially because there is no way to get it. I will never be one of the Folk.

I take a deep breath. If I could ask him for any boon, what would it be? I understand the danger, of course. Once I tell him, he is going to try to strike a bargain, and faerie bargains seldom favor the mortal. But the potential for power dangles before me.

My thoughts go to the necklace at my throat, the sting of my own palm against my cheek, the sound of Oak's laughter.

I think of Cardan: *See what we can do with a few words? We can enchant you to run around on all fours, barking like a dog. We can curse you to wither away for want of a song you'll never hear again or a kind word from my lips.*

"To resist enchantment," I say, trying to will myself to stillness. Trying not to fidget. I want to seem like a serious person who makes serious bargains.

He regards me steadily. "You already have True Sight, given to you as a child. Surely you understand our ways. You know the charms. Salt our food and you destroy any ensorcellment on it. Turn your stockings inside out and you will never find yourself led astray. Keep your pockets full of dried rowan berries and your mind won't be influenced."

The last few days have shown me how woefully inadequate those protections are. "What happens when they turn out my pockets? What

happens when they rip my stockings? What happens when they scatter my salt in the dirt?”

He regards me thoughtfully. “Come closer, child,” he says.

I hesitate. From all I have observed of Prince Dain, he has always seemed like a creature of honor. But what I have observed is painfully little.

“Come now, if you are going to serve me, you must trust me.” He is leaning forward in the chair. I notice the small horns just above his brow, parting his hair on either side of his regal face. I notice the strength in his arms and the signet ring gleaming on one long-fingered hand, carved with the symbol of the Greenbriar line.

I slide from the chair arm and walk over to where he sits. I force myself to speak. “I didn’t mean to be disrespectful.”

He touches a bruise on my cheek, one I hadn’t realized was there. I flinch, but I don’t move away from him. “Cardan is a spoiled child. It is well-known in the Court that he squanders his lineage on drink and petty squabbles. No, don’t bother to object.”

I don’t. I wonder how it was that Gnarbone came to tell me only that a prince was waiting for me downstairs, but not which prince. I wonder if Dain told him to give me that specific message. *A well-seasoned strategist waits for the right opportunity.*

“Although we are brothers, we are very different from each other. I will never be cruel to you for the sake of delighting in it. If you swear yourself into my service, you will find yourself rewarded. But what I want you for is not knighthood.”

My heart sinks. It was too much to believe that a prince of Faerie had dropped by to make all my dreams come true, but it was nice while it lasted. “Then what do you want?”

“Nothing you haven’t already offered. You wanted to give me your oath and your sword. I accept. I need someone who can lie, someone with ambition. Spy for me. Join my Court of Shadows. I can make you powerful beyond what you might ever hope. It’s not easy for humans to be here with us. But I could make it easier for you.”

I allow myself to sink into a chair. It feels a little bit like expecting a proposal of marriage, only to get offered the role of mistress.

A spy. A sneak. A liar and a thief. Of course that’s what he thinks of me, of mortals. Of course that’s what he thinks I am good for.

I consider the spies I have seen, like the parsnip-nosed and hunched figure Madoc consults with sometimes, or a shadowy, gray-shrouded figure whose face I've never managed to spot. All the royals probably have them, but doubtless part of their skill is in how well hidden they are.

And I would be well hidden, indeed, hidden in plain sight.

"It is perhaps not the future you imagined for yourself," Prince Dain says. "No shining armor or riding into battle, but I promise you that once I am the High King, if you serve well, you will be able to do as you like, for who can gainsay the High King? And I will put a geas on you, a geas of protection from enchantment."

I go very still. Usually given to mortals in exchange for their service, geases grant power, with a kick-in-the-teeth exception that comes upon you when you least expect it. Like, you're invulnerable, except to an arrow made of the heartwood of a hawthorn tree, which just so happens to be the exact kind of arrow that your worst enemy favors. Or you'll win every battle you're in, but you're not allowed to refuse invitations to dinner, so if someone invites you to dinner right before a battle, you're not going to be able to show up for that fight. Basically, like everything about Faerie, geases are awesome, and also they suck. Yet, it seems like that's what I am being offered.

"A geas," I echo.

His smile widens, and after a moment, I know why. I haven't said no. Which means I am thinking of saying yes.

"No geas can save you from the effects of our fruits and poisons. Think carefully. I could grant you the power to enrapture all who looked upon you instead. I could give you a spot right there." He touches my forehead. "And anyone who saw it would be struck with love. I could give you a magical blade that cuts through starlight."

"I don't want to be controlled," I say, my voice a whisper. I can't believe I am saying this out loud, to him. I can't believe I am doing this. "Magically, I mean. Give me that, and I will manage the rest."

He nods once. "So you accept."

It's frightening to have a choice like this in front of me, a choice that changes all future choices.

I want power so badly. And this is an opportunity for it, a terrifying and slightly insulting opportunity. But also an intriguing one. Would I have

made a good knight? I have no way of knowing.

Maybe I would have hated it. Maybe it would have meant standing around in armor and going on dull quests. Maybe it would have meant fighting people I liked.

I nod and hope I make a good spy.

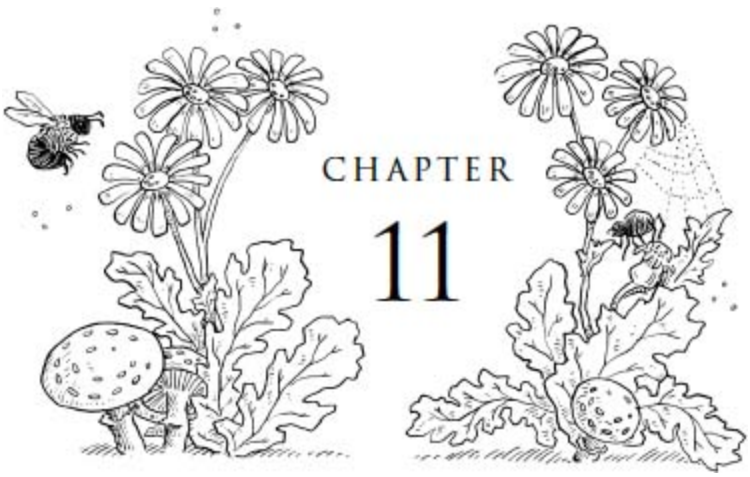
Prince Dain rises and touches my shoulder. I feel the shock of the contact, like a spark of static. “Jude Duarte, daughter of clay, from this day forward no Faerie glamour will addle your mind. No enchantment will move your body against your will. None save for that of the maker of this geas.

“Now no one will be able to control you,” he says, and then pauses for a moment. “Except for me.”

I suck in a breath. Of course there’s a sting in the tail of this bargain. I cannot even be angry with him; I should have guessed.

And yet, it is still thrilling to have any protection at all. Prince Dain is only one faerie, and he has seen something in me, something Madoc wouldn’t see, something I have yearned to have acknowledged.

Right then and there, I go down on one knee on the ancient rug in Madoc’s study and swear myself into Prince Dain’s service.



CHAPTER 11

All night, as I sit through dinner, I am conscious of the secret I hold. It makes me feel, for the first time, as though I have a power of my own, a power Madoc cannot take from me. Even thinking of it for too long—I am a spy! I am Prince Dain's spy!—gives me a thrill.

We eat little birds stuffed with barley and wild ramps, their skins crackling with fat and honey. Oriana delicately picks hers apart. Oak chews on the skin. Madoc does not bother to separate off the flesh, eating bones and all. I poke at the stewed parsnips. Although Taryn is at the table, Vivi has not returned. I suspect that hunting with Rhyia was a ruse and that she has gone to the mortal world after a brief ride through the woods. I wonder if she ate her dinner with Heather's family.

"You did well at the tournament," Madoc says between bites.

I do not point out that he left the grounds. He couldn't have been too impressed. I am not even sure how much he actually saw. "Does that mean you've changed your mind?"

Something in my voice makes him stop chewing and regard me with narrowed eyes. "About knighthood?" he asks. "No. Once there is a new High King in place, we will discuss your future."

My mouth curves into a secretive smile. "As you wish."

Down the table, Taryn watches Oriana and tries to copy her movements with the little bird. She does not look my way, even when she asks me to pass her a carafe of water.

She can’t keep me from following her to her room when we’re done, though.

“Look,” I say on the stairs. “I tried to do what you wanted, but I couldn’t, and I don’t want you to hate me for it. It’s my life.”

She turns around. “Your life to squander?”

“Yes,” I say as we come to the landing. I cannot tell her about Prince Dain, but even if I could, I am not sure it would help. I am not at all sure she’d approve of that, either. “Our lives are the only real thing we have, our only coin. We get to buy what we want with them.”

Taryn rolls her eyes. Her voice is acid. “Isn’t that pretty? Did you make it up yourself?”

“What is the matter with you?” I demand.

She shakes her head. “Nothing. Nothing. Maybe it would be better if I thought the way that you do. Never mind, Jude. You really were good out there.”

“Thanks,” I say, frowning in confusion. I wonder again over Cardan’s words about her, but I do not want to repeat them and make her feel bad. “So have you fallen in love yet?” I ask.

All my question gets me is a strange look. “I am staying home from the lecture tomorrow,” Taryn says. “I guess it is your life to squander, but I don’t have to watch.”

My feet feel like lead as I make my way to the palace, over ground strewn with windfall apples, their golden scent blowing in the air. I am wearing a long black dress with gold cuffs and a lacing of green braid, a comfortable favorite.

Afternoon birdsong trills above me, making me smile. I let myself have a brief fantasy of Prince Dain’s coronation, of me dancing with a grinning Locke while Cardan is dragged away and thrown in a dark oubliette.

A flash of white startles me from my thoughts. It's a stag—a white stag, standing not ten feet from where I am. His antlers are threaded with a few thin cobwebs, and his coat is a white so bright that it seems silver in the afternoon light. We regard each other for a long moment, before he races off in the direction of the palace, taking my breath with him.

I decide to believe this is a good omen.

And, at least at first, it seems to be. Classes aren't too bad. Noggle, our instructor, is a kind but odd old Fir Darrig from up north, with huge eyebrows, a long beard into which he occasionally shoves pens or scraps of paper, and a tendency to maunder on about meteor storms and their meanings. As afternoon turns to evening, he has us counting falling stars, which is a dull but relaxing task. I lie back on my blanket and stare up at the night sky.

The only downside is that it is hard for me to note down numbers in the dark. Usually, glowing orbs hang from the trees or large concentrations of fireflies light our lessons. I carry extra stubs of candles for when even that is too dim, since human eyesight isn't nearly as keen as theirs, but I'm not allowed to light them when we study the stars. I try to write legibly and not get ink all over my fingers.

"Remember," Noggle says, "unusual celestial events often presage important political changes, so with a new king on the horizon, it's important for us to observe the signs carefully."

Some giggling rises out of the darkness.

"Nicasia," our instructor says. "Is there some difficulty?"

Her haughty voice is unrepentant. "None at all."

"Now, what can you tell me about falling stars? What would be the meaning of a shower of them in the last hour of a night?"

"A dozen births," Nicasia says, which is wrong enough to make me wince.

"*Deaths*," I say under my breath.

Noggle hears me, unfortunately. "Very good, Jude. I am glad someone has been paying attention. Now, who would like to tell me when those deaths are most likely to occur?"

There is no point in my holding back, not when I made a declaration that I was going to shame Cardan with my greatness. I better start being great. "It depends on which of the constellations they passed through and in which

direction the stars fell," I say. Halfway through answering, I feel like my throat is going to close up. I am suddenly glad of the dark, so I don't have to see Cardan's expression. Or Nicasia's.

"Excellent," Noggle says. "Which is why our notes must be thorough. Continue!"

"This is dull," I hear Valerian drawl. "Prophecy is for hags and small folk. We should be learning things of a more noble mien. If I am going to pass a night on my back, then I'd wish to be lessoned in *love*."

Some of the others laugh.

"Very well," said Noggle. "Tell me what event might portend success in love?"

"A girl taking off her dress," he says to more laughter.

"Elga?" Noggle calls on a girl with silver hair and a laugh like shattering glass. "Can you answer for him? Perhaps he's had such little success in love that he truly doesn't know."

She begins to stammer. I suspect she knows the answer but doesn't want to court Valerian's ire.

"Shall I ask Jude again?" Noggle asks tartly. "Or perhaps Cardan. Why don't you tell us?"

"No," he says.

"What was that?" Noggle asks.

When Cardan speaks, his voice rings with sinister authority. "It is as Valerian says. This lesson is boring. You will light the lamps and begin another, more worthy one."

Noggle pauses for a long moment. "Yes, my prince," he says finally, and all the globes around us flare to life. I blink several times as my eyes try to adjust. I wonder if Cardan has ever had to do anything he didn't want to. I guess it is no surprise that he drowses during lectures. No surprise that he once, drunk as anything, rode a horse across the grass while we were having classes, trampling blankets and books and sending everyone scrambling to get out of his way. He can change our curriculum on a whim. How can anything matter to someone like that?

"Her eyesight is so poor," Nicasia says, and I realize she's standing over me. She has my notebook and waves it around so everyone can see my scrawls. "Poor, poor, Jude. It's so hard to overcome so many disadvantages."

There’s ink all over my fingers and on the golden cuffs of my dress.

Across the grove, Cardan is talking with Valerian. Only Locke is watching us, his expression troubled. Noggle is flipping through a stack of thick, dusty books, probably trying to come up with a lesson that Cardan will like.

“Sorry if you can’t read my handwriting,” I say, grabbing the notebook. The page tears, leaving most of my night’s work shredded. “But that’s not exactly *my* disadvantage.”

Nicasia slaps me in the face. I stumble, shocked, suddenly down on one knee, barely catching myself before I go sprawling. My cheek is hot, stinging. My head rings.

“You can’t do that,” I say to her nonsensically.

I thought I understood how this game worked. I thought wrong.

“I may do whatever I wish,” she informs me, still haughty.

Our classmates stare. Elga has one delicate hand over her mouth. Cardan looks over, and I can tell from his expression that she has failed to please him. Embarrassment starts to creep over Nicasia’s face.

For as long as I have been among them, there were lines they didn’t cross. When they shoved us into the river, no one witnessed it. For better or worse, I am part of the general’s household and under Madoc’s protection. Cardan might dare to cross him, but I thought the others would at least strike in secret.

I seem to have angered Nicasia past caring about any of that.

I brush myself off. “Are you calling me out? Because then it’s my right to choose the time and the weapon.” How I would love to knock her down.

She realizes that my question actually demands a response. I might be lower than the ground, but that doesn’t absolve her from obligations to her own honor.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cardan coming toward us. Jittery anticipation commingles with dread. On my other side, Valerian bumps my shoulder. I take a step away from him, but not fast enough to avoid being assailed with the smell of overripe fruit.

Above us, in the black dome of night, seven stars fall, streaking gloriously across the sky before guttering out. I look up automatically, too late to have seen their precise path.

“Did anyone note that down?” Noggle begins shouting, fumbling in his beard for a pen. “This is the celestial event we’ve been waiting for! Someone must have seen the exact origin point. Quickly! Set down everything you can remember.”

Just then, as I am looking at the stars, Valerian shoves something soft against my mouth. An apple, sweet and rotten at the same time, honeyed juice running over my tongue, tasting of sunlight and pure heady, stupid joy. Faerie fruit, which muddles the mind, which makes humans crave it enough to starve themselves for another taste, which makes us pliant and suggestible and ridiculous.

Dain’s geas protected me from enchantment, from anyone’s control, but faerie fruit puts you out of even your own control.

Oh no. Oh no no no no no.

I spit it out. The apple rolls in the dirt, but I can already feel it working on me.

Salt, I think, fumbling for my basket. Salt is what I need. Salt is the antidote. It will clear the fog in my head.

Nicasia sees what I am going for and snatches up my basket, dancing out of the way, while Valerian pushes me to the ground. I try to crawl away from him, but he pins me, shoving the filthy apple back into my face.

“Let me sweeten that sour tongue of yours,” he says, pressing it down. Pulp is in my mouth and up my nose.

I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.

My eyes are open, staring up at Valerian’s face. I’m choking. He’s watching me with an expression of mild curiosity, as though he’s looking forward to seeing what happens next.

Darkness is creeping in at the edges of my vision. I am choking to death.

The worst part is the joy blooming inside me from the fruit, blotting out the terror. Everything is beautiful. My vision is swimming. I reach up to claw at Valerian’s face, but I am too dizzy to reach him. A moment later, it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to hurt him, not when I am so happy.

“Do something!” someone says, but in my delirium, I can’t tell who is speaking.

Abruptly, Valerian is kicked off me. I roll onto my side, coughing. Cardan is looming there. Tears and snot are running down my face, but all I

can do is lie in the dirt and spit out pieces of sweet, fleshy pulp. I have no idea why I am crying.

“Enough,” Cardan says. He has an odd, wild expression on his face, and a muscle is jumping in his jaw.

I start to laugh.

Valerian looks mutinous. “Ruin my fun, will you?”

For a moment, I think they’re going to fight, although I cannot think why. Then I see what Cardan’s got in his hand. The salt from my basket. The antidote. (Why did I want that? I wonder.) He tosses it up into the air with a laugh, and I watch it scatter with the wind. Then he looks at Valerian, mouth curling. “What’s wrong with you, Valerian? If she dies, your little prank is over before it begins.”

“I’m not going to die,” I say, because I don’t want them to worry. I feel fine. I feel better than I have ever felt in my entire life. I’m glad the antidote is gone.

“Prince Cardan?” Noggle says. “She ought to be taken home.”

“Everyone is so dull today,” Cardan says, but he doesn’t sound as if he’s bored. He sounds as if he’s barely keeping his temper in check.

“Oh, Noggle, she doesn’t wish to go.” Nicasia comes over to me and strokes my cheek. “Do you, pretty thing?”

The cloying taste of honey is in my mouth. I feel light. I am unwinding. I am unfurling like a banner. “I’d like to stay,” I say, because here is wondrous. Because she is dazzling.

I’m not sure I feel good, but I know I feel great.

Everything is wondrous. Even Cardan. I didn’t like him before, but that seems silly. I give him a wide, happy grin, although he doesn’t smile in return.

I don’t take it personally.

Noggle turns away from us, muttering something about the general and foolishness and princes getting their heads removed from their shoulders. Cardan watches him go, hands fisting at his sides.

A knot of girls flop down in the moss beside me. They’re laughing, which makes me laugh again, too. “I’ve never seen a mortal take the fruits of Elfhame before,” one of them, Flossflower, says to another. “Will she remember this?”

“Would that someone would enchant her to do otherwise,” Locke says from somewhere behind me, but he doesn’t sound angry like Cardan. He sounds nice. I turn toward him, and he touches my shoulder. I lean into the warmth of his skin.

Nicasia laughs. “She wouldn’t want that. What she’d like is another bite of apple.”

My mouth waters at the memory. I recall them strewn across my path, golden and glittering, on the way to school and curse my foolishness for not stopping to eat my fill.

“So we can ask her things?” Another girl—Moragna—wants to know. “Embarrassing things. And she’ll answer?”

“Why should she find anything embarrassing when she’s among friends?” says Nicasia, eyes slitted. She looks like a cat that has eaten all the cream and is ready for a nap in the sun.

“Which one of us would you most like to kiss?” Flossflower demands, coming closer. She’s barely spoken to me before. I’m glad she wants to be friends.

“I’d like to kiss all of you,” I say, which makes them scream with laughter. I grin up at the stars.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” Nicasia says, frowning at my skirts. “And they’ve grown dirty. You should take them off.”

My dress does seem abruptly heavy. I imagine myself naked in the moonlight, my skin turned as silvery as the leaves above us.

I stand. Everything feels as if it’s going a bit sideways. I start pulling off my clothes.

“You’re right,” I say, delighted. My gown slides into a puddle of cloth that I can easily step out of. I am wearing mortal underclothes—a mint-and-black polka-dotted bra and underpants.

They’re all staring at me oddly, as though wondering where I got my underwear. All of them so resplendent that it is difficult for me to look too long without my head hurting.

I am conscious of the softness of my body, of the calluses on my hands, and of the sway of my breasts. I am conscious of the soft tickle of grass underneath my feet and the warm earth.

“Am I beautiful like you are?” I ask Nicasia, genuinely curious.

“No,” she says, darting a look toward Valerian. She picks up something from the ground. “You are nothing like us.” I am sorry to hear it but not surprised. Beside them, anyone might as well be a shadow, a blurry reflection of a reflection.

Valerian points to the rowan necklace that dangles around my throat, dried red berries threaded onto a long silver chain. “You should take that off, too.”

I nod conspiratorially. “You’re right,” I say. “I don’t need it anymore.”

Nicasia smiles, holding up the golden thing she has in her hand. The filthy, mashed remains of the apple. “Come lick my hands clean. You don’t mind, do you? But you have to do it on your knees.”

Gasping and tittering spread through our classmates like a breeze. They want me to do it. I want to make them happy. I want everyone to be as happy as I am. And I do want another taste of the fruit. I begin to crawl toward Nicasia.

“No,” Cardan says, stepping in front of me, his voice ringing and a little unsteady. The others back off, giving him room. He toes off his soft leather shoe and puts one pale foot directly in front of me. “Jude will come here and kiss my foot. She said she wanted to kiss us. And I am her prince, after all.”

I laugh again. Honestly, I don’t know why I laughed so infrequently before. Everything is marvelous and ridiculous.

Looking up at Cardan, though, something strikes me wrong. His eyes are glittering with fury and desire and maybe even shame. A moment later, he blinks, and it’s just his usual chilly arrogance.

“Well? Be quick about it,” he says impatiently. “Kiss my foot and tell me how great I am. Tell me how much you admire me.”

“Enough,” Locke says sharply to Cardan. He’s got his hands on my shoulders and is pulling me roughly to my feet. “I’m taking her home.”

“Are you, now?” Cardan asks him, eyebrows raised. “Interesting timing. You like the savor of a little humiliation, just not too much?”

“I hate it when you get like this,” Locke says under his breath.

Cardan pulls a pin from his coat, a glittering, filigree thing in the shape of an acorn with an oak leaf behind it. For a delirious moment, I think he’s going to give it to Locke in exchange for leaving me there. That seems impossible, even to my wild mind.

Then Cardan takes hold of my hand, which seems even less possible. His fingers are overwarm against my skin. He stabs the point of his pin into my thumb.

“Ow,” I say, pulling away from him and putting the injured digit into my mouth. My own blood is metallic against my tongue.

“Have a nice walk home,” he tells me.

Locke guides me away, stopping to grab up someone’s blanket, which he wraps around my shoulders. Faeries are staring at us as we pass out of the grove, me stumbling, him holding me up. The few teachers I see do not meet my gaze.

I suck on my injured thumb, feeling odd. My head is still swimming, but not like it was. Something’s wrong. A moment later, I realize what. There’s salt in my human blood.

My stomach lurches.

I look back at Cardan, who is laughing with Valerian and Nicasia. Moragna is on his arm. Another of our lecturers, a sinewy elf-woman from an island to the east, is trying to begin her talk.

I hate them. I hate them all so much. For a moment, there is only that, the heat of my fury turning my every thought to ash. With shaking hands, I clutch the blanket more tightly around my shoulders and let Locke lead me into the woods.

“I owe you a debt,” I grit out after we walk for a little while. “For getting me out of there.”

He gives me an appraising look. I am struck all over again by how handsome he is, by the soft curls falling around his face. It’s awful to be alone with him, knowing he’s seen me in my underwear and crawling around on the ground, but I am too angry for embarrassment.

He shakes his head. “You don’t owe anyone anything, Jude. Especially not today.”

“How can you stand them?” I ask, fury making me turn on Locke, even though he’s the only one I’m not mad at. “They’re horrible. They’re monsters.”

He doesn’t answer me. We walk along, and when I come to the patch of windfall apples, I kick one so hard it ricochets off the trunk of an elm tree.

“There is a pleasure in being with them,” he says. “Taking what we wish, indulging in every terrible thought. There’s safety in being awful.”

“Because at least they’re not terrible to you?” I ask.

Again, he does not answer.

When we get close to Madoc’s estate, I stop. “I should go alone from here.” I give him a smile that probably wavers a little bit. It’s hard to keep it on my face.

“Wait,” he says, taking a step toward me. “I want to see you again.”

I groan, too exasperated for surprise. I am standing here in a borrowed blanket, boots, and mall-bought underwear. I am smeared in soil, and I have just made a fool of myself. *“Why?”*

He looks at me as though he sees something else entirely. There’s an intensity in his gaze that makes me stand up a little straighter, despite the dirt. “Because you’re like a story that hasn’t happened yet. Because I want to see what you will do. I want to be part of the unfolding of the tale.”

I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not, but I guess I’ll take it.

He lifts my hand—the same one Cardan stabbed with the pin—and kisses the very tips of my fingers. “Until tomorrow,” he says, making a bow.

And so, in that borrowed blanket, boots, and mall-bought underwear, I walk on by myself, heading for home.

“Tell me who did this,” Madoc insists, over and over again, but I won’t. He stomps around, explaining in detail how he will find the faeries responsible and destroy them. He will rip out their hearts. He will cut off their heads and mount them on the roof of our house as a warning to others.

I know it’s not me he’s threatening, but it’s still me he’s yelling at.

When I am scared, I can’t forget that no matter how well he plays the role of father, he will always and forever also be my father’s murderer.

I don’t say anything. I think about how Oriana was afraid that Taryn or I would misbehave at the Court and cause Madoc embarrassment. Now I wonder if she was more worried about how he’d react if something did happen. Cutting off Valerian’s and Nicasia’s heads is bad politics. Hurting Cardan amounts to treason.

“I did it myself,” I say finally, to make this stop. “I saw the fruit and it looked good, so I ate it.”

“How could you be so foolish?” Oriana says, whirling around. She doesn’t look surprised; she looks as though I am confirming her worst suspicions. “Jude, you know better.”

“I wanted to have fun. It’s supposed to be fun,” I tell her, playing the disobedient daughter for all it’s worth. “And it *was*. It was like a beautiful dream—”

“Be quiet!” Madoc shouts, shocking us both into silence. “Both of you, *quiet*!”

I cringe involuntarily.

“Jude, stop trying to annoy Oriana,” he says, giving me an exasperated look I am not sure he’s ever given me before, but has turned it on Vivi plenty.

He knows I’m lying.

“And, Oriana, don’t be so gullible.” When she realizes what he means, a small, delicate hand comes up to cover her mouth.

“When I find out whom you’re protecting,” he tells me, “they will be sorry they ever drew breath.”

“This is not helping,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

He kneels down in front of me and takes my hand in his rough green fingers. He must be able to feel how I am trembling. He lets out a long sigh, probably discarding more threats. “Then tell me what will help, Jude. Tell me, and I will do it.”

I wonder what would happen if I said the words: *Nicasia humiliated me. Valerian tried to murder me. They did it to impress Prince Cardan, who hates me. I am scared of them. I am more scared of them than I am of you, and you terrify me. Make them stop. Make them leave me alone.*

But I won’t. Madoc’s anger is fathomless. I have seen it in my mother’s blood on the kitchen floor. Once summoned, it cannot be called back.

What if he murdered Cardan? What if he killed them all? His answer to so many problems is bloodshed. If they were dead, their parents would demand satisfaction. The wrath of the High King would fall on him. I would be worse off than I am now, and Madoc would likely be dead.

“Teach me more,” I say instead. “More strategy. More bladework. Teach me everything you know.” Prince Dain may want me for a spy, but that doesn’t mean giving up my sword.

Madoc looks impressed, and Oriana, annoyed. I can tell she thinks that I am manipulating him and that I am doing a good job of it.

"Very well," he says with a sigh. "Tatterfell will bring you dinner, unless you feel up to joining us at the dining table. We will begin a more intensive training tomorrow."

"I'll eat upstairs," I say, and head to my room, still wrapped in someone else's blanket. On the way, I pass Taryn's closed door. Part of me wants to go in, fling myself on her bed, and weep. I want her to hold me and tell me that there wasn't anything I could have done differently. I want her to tell me that I am brave and that she loves me.

But since I am sure that's not what she'd do, I pass her door by.

My room has been tidied while I was gone, my bed made and my windows opened to let in the night air. And there, on the foot of my bed, is a folded-up dress of homespun with the royal crest that servants of the princes and princesses wear. Sitting on the balcony is the owl-faced hob.

It preens a bit, ruffling its feathers.

"You," I say. "You're one of his—"

"Go to Hollow Hall tomorrow, sweetmeat," it chirps, cutting me off. "Find us a secret the king won't like. Find treason."

Hollow Hall. That's the home of Balekin, the eldest prince.

I have my first assignment from the Court of Shadows.

I go to sleep early, and when I wake, it is full dark. My head hurts—maybe from sleeping too long—and my body aches. I must have slept with all my muscles tensed.

The lectures of that day have already begun. It doesn't matter. I'm not going.

Tatterfell has left me a tray with coffee on it, spiced with cinnamon and cloves and a little bit of pepper. I pour a cup. It's lukewarm, which means it has been there for a while. There's toast, too, which softens up when I dunk it a few times.

Then I wash my face, which is still sticky with pulp, and then the rest of me. I brush my hair roughly, and then I pull it into a bun by knotting it around a twig.

I refuse to think about what happened the day before. I refuse to think about anything but today and my mission for Prince Dain.

Go to Hollow Hall. Find us a secret the king won't like. Find treason.

So Dain wants me to help ensure that Balekin isn't chosen to be the next High King. Eldred can choose any of his children for the throne, but he favors the three eldest: Balekin, Dain, and Elowyn—and Dain above the others. I wonder if spies help keep it that way.

If I can be good at this, then Dain will give me power when he ascends the throne. And after yesterday, I crave it. I crave it like I craved the taste of faerie fruit.

I put on the servant's dress without any of my mall-acquired underclothes to make sure I am as authentic as possible. For shoes, I dig out a pair of old leather slippers from the back of my closet. They have a hole through the toe that I tried to fix nearly a year ago, but my sewing skills are poor, and I wound up just making them ugly. They fit, though, and all my other shoes are too beautifully made.

We do not have human servants at Madoc's estate, but I have seen them in other parts of Faerie. Human midwives to deliver babies from human consorts. Human artisans cursed or blessed with tempting skill. Human wet nurses to suckle sickly faerie infants. Little human changelings, raised in Faerie, but not educated with the Gentry as we are. Cheerful magic-seekers who don't mind a little drudgery in exchange for some wish of their heart. When our paths cross, I try to talk to them. Sometimes they want to, and sometimes they don't. Most nonartisans have been at least slightly glamoured to smooth out their memories. They think they're in a hospital or at a rich person's house. And when they're returned home—and Madoc has assured me that they are—they're paid well and even given gifts, such as good luck or shiny hair or a knack for guessing the right lotto numbers.

But I know there are also humans who make bad bargains or offend the wrong faerie and who are not treated so well. Taryn and I hear things, even if no one means for us to—stories of humans sleeping on stone floors and eating refuse, believing themselves to be resting on feather beds and supping on delicacies. Humans drugged out of their minds on faerie fruit. Balekin's servants are rumored to be the latter, ill-favored and worse-treated.

I shudder at the thought of it. And yet I can see why a mortal would make a useful spy, beyond the ability to lie. A mortal can pass into low places and high without much notice. Holding a harp, we're bards. In homespun, we're servants. In gowns, we're wives with squalling goblin children.

I guess being beneath notice has advantages.

Next I pack a leather bag with a shift and a knife, throw a thick velvet cloak over my dress, and descend the stairs. The coffee churns in my gut. I

am almost to the door when I see Vivi seated on the tapestry-covered window seat.

“You’re up,” she says, standing. “Good. Do you want to shoot things? I’ve got arrows.”

“Maybe later.” I keep my cloak clutched tightly around me and try to move past her, keeping a blandly happy expression on my face.

It doesn’t work. Her arm shoots out to block me. “Taryn told me what you said to the prince at the tournament,” she says. “And Oriana told me how you came home last night. I can guess the rest.”

“I don’t need another lecture,” I say to her. This mission from Dain is the only thing keeping me from being haunted by what happened the day before. I don’t want to lose focus. I am afraid that if I do, I will lose my composure, too.

“Taryn feels awful,” Vivi says.

“Yeah,” I say. “Sometimes it sucks to be right.”

“Stop it.” She grabs for my arm, looking at me with her split-pupiled eyes. “You can talk to me. You can trust me. What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I say. “I made a mistake. I got angry. I wanted to prove something. It was stupid.”

“Was it because of what I said?” Her fingers are gripping my arm hard.

The Folk are going to keep treating you like crap.

“Vivi, there’s no way my deciding to mess up my life is your fault,” I tell her. “But I will make them regret crossing me.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Vivi asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, pulling free. I head toward the door, and this time she doesn’t stop me. Once I’m out, I rush across the lawn to the stables.

I know I am not being fair to Vivi, who hasn’t done anything. She just wanted to help.

Maybe I don’t know how to be a good sister anymore.

At the stables, I have to stop and lean against a wall while I take deep breaths. For more than half my life, I’ve been fighting down panic. Maybe it’s not the best thing for a constant rattle of nerves to seem normal, even necessary. But at this point, I wouldn’t know how to live without it.

The most important thing is to impress Prince Dain. I can’t let Cardan and his friends take that from me.

To get to Hollow Hall, I decide to take one of the toads, since only the Gentry ride silver-shod horses. Although a servant would probably not have a mount of any kind, at least the toad is less conspicuous.

Only in Faerieland is a giant toad the *less* conspicuous choice.

I saddle and bridle a spotted one and lead her out onto the grass. Her long tongue lashes one of her golden eyes, making me take an involuntary step back.

I hook my foot in the stirrup and swing up onto the seat. With one hand, I pull on the reins, and with the other, I pat the soft, cool skin of her back. The spotted toad launches us into the air, and I hang on.

Hollow Hall is a stone manor with a tall, crooked tower, the whole thing half-covered in vines and ivy. There's a balcony on the second floor that seems to have a rail of thick roots in place of iron. A curtain of thinner tendrils hangs down from it, like a scraggly beard clotted with dirt. There is something misshapen about the estate that ought to make it charming but instead makes it ominous. I tie up the toad, stuff my cloak into her saddlebags, and start toward the side of the manor, where I believe I will find a servants' door. On the way, I stop to pick mushrooms, so it will seem as though I had a reason for being out in the woods.

As I get close, my heart speeds anew. Balekin won't hurt me, I tell myself. Even if I'm caught, he'll simply turn me over to Madoc. Nothing bad is going to happen.

I'm not entirely sure that's true, but I manage to persuade myself enough to approach the servants' entrance and slip inside.

A hallway goes to the kitchens, where I deposit the mushrooms on a table beside a brace of bloody rabbits, a pigeon pie, a bouquet of garlic scapes and rosemary, a few cloudy-skinned plums, and dozens of bottles of wine. A troll stirs a large pot alongside a winged pixie. And cutting up vegetables are two sunken-cheeked humans, a boy and a girl, both of them with small, stupid smiles on their faces and glazed-over looks in their eyes. They don't even look down as they chop, and I'm surprised they don't cut off their own fingers by accident. Worse, if they did, I am not sure they'd notice.

I think of how I felt yesterday, and the echo of faerie fruit comes unbidden into my mouth. I feel my gorge rise, and I hurry past, down the hall.

I am stopped by a pale-eyed faerie guard, who grabs my arm. I look up at him, hoping I can school my expression to be as blank and pleasant and dreamy as that of the mortals in the kitchens.

“I haven’t seen you before,” he tells me, making it an accusation.

“You’re lovely,” I say, trying to sound awed and a little confused. “Pretty eye mirrors.”

He makes a disgusted sound, which I guess means I am doing a good enough job of pretending to be an ensorcelled human servant, although I feel I went weird and over the top in my nervousness. I am not as good at improvising as I had hoped I would be.

“Are you new?” he asks, saying the words slowly.

“New?” I echo, trying to figure out what someone brought here might think about the experience. I cannot stop remembering the sickly sweet taste of faerie fruit on my tongue, but instead of getting me deeper into character, I just want to throw up. “Before I was somewhere else,” I blurt out, “but now I have to clean the great hall with polish until every inch of it shines.”

“Well, I guess you best, then,” he says, letting me go.

I try to control the shudder building up under my skin. I don’t flatter myself that my acting convinced him; he was convinced because I’m human and he expects humans to be servants. Again, I can see why Prince Dain thought I would be useful. After the guard, it is fairly easy to move around Hollow Hall. There are dozens of humans drifting through their chores, lost in sickly dreams. They sing little songs to themselves and whisper words out loud, but it’s obviously just snatches of a conversation happening in their dreams. Their eyes are shadowed. Their mouths, chapped.

No wonder the guard thought I was new.

Besides the servants, however, are the fey. Guests of some fete that seems to have ebbed rather than ended. They sleep in various states of undress, draped over couches and entwined on the floors of the parlors I pass through, their mouths stained gold with nevermore, a glittering golden powder so concentrated that it stupefies faeries and gives mortals the ability to glamour one another. Goblets lie on their side, mead pooling to run over the uneven floor like tributaries into great honey-wine lakes. Some of the Folk are so still I worry that they have debauched themselves into death.

“Excuse me,” I say to a girl about my age carrying a tin bucket. She passes me without even seeming to notice I have spoken.

With no idea what else to do, I decide to follow. We pad up a wide stone staircase without rails. Three more of the Folk lie in a dissipated stupor beside a thimble-sized bottle of spirits. Above, from the other end of the hall, I hear an odd cry, like someone in pain. Something heavy hits the ground. Rattled, I try to school my face back to dreamy nonchalance, but it isn’t easy. My heart beats like a trapped bird.

The girl opens a door to a bedroom suite, and I slip in behind her.

The walls are stone and hung with no paintings or tapestries. A massive half-tester bed takes up most of the space in the first room, the headboard panel carved with various animals with women’s heads and bare breasts—owls and snakes and foxes—doing some kind of weird dance.

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, since Balekin heads the profligate Circle of Grackles.

The books piled up on the wooden desk are ones I recognize—the same books Taryn and I study for our classes. These are spread out, with a few pieces of paper scattered over the wood between them, beside an open inkpot. One of the books has careful notations along one side, while the other is covered in blots. A broken pen, snapped in half deliberately—or at least I can’t think of a way it could have happened that’s not deliberate—is lying in the hinge of the ink-stained book.

Nothing that looks treasonous.

Prince Dain gifted me the uniform, knowing I could walk in as I had done. He was counting on my ability to lie for the rest. But now that I am inside, I hope there is something in Hollow Hall to find.

Which means that no matter how frightened I am, I must pay attention.

Along the wall are more books, some of them familiar from Madoc’s library. I pause in front of a shelf, frowning, and kneel down. Stuffed into a corner is a copy of a book I know but didn’t expect to see here in this place—*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, bound together in one volume. Mom read to us from one a lot like that back in the mortal world.

Opening the book, I see the familiar illustrations and then the words:

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.

“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

A bubble of scary laughter threatens to rise up my throat, and I have to bite my cheek to keep it from coming.

The human girl is kneeling in front of a huge fireplace, sweeping up ash from the grate. The andirons, shaped like enormous curling serpents, flank her, their glass eyes ready to glow with lit flames.

Although it’s ridiculous, I can’t bear to put the book back. It isn’t one Vivi packed, and I haven’t seen it since my mother read it at bedtime. I stuff it down the front of my dress.

Then I go to the wardrobe and open it, seeking some clue, some valuable piece of information. But as soon as I look inside, a wild panic starts in my chest. I am instantly sure whose room I am in. Those are Prince Cardan’s extravagant doublets and breeches, Prince Cardan’s gaudy, fur-edged capelets and spider-silk shirts.

Done sweeping up ash in the fireplace, the servant girl stacks new wood into a pyramid with aromatic pine for kindling resting on top.

I want to push by her and run from Hollow Hall. I had assumed that Cardan lived in the palace with his father, the High King. It didn’t occur to me that he might live with one of his brothers. I remember Dain and Balekin drinking together at the last Court revel. I hope desperately that this wasn’t arranged to humiliate me further, to give Cardan another excuse—or worse, opportunity—to punish me more.

I will not believe it. Prince Dain, about to be crowned the High King, does not have time to indulge in the petty sport of pretending to take me into his service just because a callow younger brother wishes it. He would not set a geas on me or bargain with me just for that. I must continue to believe it, because the alternative is too awful.

All this means is that besides Prince Balekin, I must avoid Prince Cardan on my way through the house. Either of them might recognize me if they glimpsed my face. I must make sure they do not glimpse it.

Probably they will not look too closely. No one looks too closely at human servants.

Realizing I am not so different, I force myself to notice the pattern of moles on the human girl's skin and the split ends of her blond hair and the roughness of her knees. I watch how she sways a little as she pushes to her feet; her body's clearly exhausted, even if her brain doesn't know it.

If I see her again, I want to know I would recognize her.

But it does no good, undoes no spell. She continues her tasks, smiling the same awful, contented smile. When she leaves the room, I head in the opposite direction. I must find Balekin's private rooms, find his secrets, and then get out.

I open doors carefully, peering inside. I discover two bedrooms, both under a thick layer of dust, one with a figure lying under a cobwebby shroud on the bed. I pause for a moment, trying to decide if it's a statue or a corpse or even some kind of living thing, then I realize this has nothing to do with my mission and back out quickly. I open another door to find several faeries twined together on a bed, asleep. One of them blinks drowsily at me, and I catch my breath, but he just slumps back down.

The seventh room enters into a hallway with stairs spiraling up and up into what must be the tower. I take them quickly, my heart racing, my leather shoes soft on the stone.

The circular room I come to is paneled in bookshelves, filled with manuscripts, scrolls, golden daggers, thin glass vials with jewel-colored liquids inside, and the skull of some deerlike creature with massive antlers supporting thin taper candles. Two large chairs rest near the only window. There's a huge table dominating the middle of the room, and on it are maps weighed down on the corners by chunks of glass and metal objects. Beneath them is correspondence. I shuffle through the papers until I come to this letter:

> *I know the provenance of the blusher mushroom that you ask after, but what you do with it must not be tied to me. After this, I consider my debt paid. Let my name be stricken from your lips.*

Although the letter is unsigned, the writing is in an elegant, feminine hand. It seems important. Could it be the proof Dain is looking for? Might it be useful enough to please him? And yet I cannot possibly take it. If it were to go missing, then Balekin would know for certain that someone had been here. I find a sheet of blank paper and press it over the note. As quickly as I

can, I trace the letter, trying to capture the precise hand in which it was written.

I am almost done when I hear a sound. People are coming up the stairs.

I panic. There's nowhere to hide. There's practically nothing even in the room; it's mostly open space, exempting the shelves. I fold up the note, knowing it's unfinished, knowing the fresh ink will smear.

As quickly as I can, I scuttle underneath one of the large leather chairs, folding myself into a tight ball. I wish I'd left the stupid book where I'd found it because one sharp corner of the cover is digging into my underarm. I wonder what I was thinking, believing myself clever enough to be a spy in Faerieland.

I squeeze my eyes shut, as though somehow not seeing whoever is coming into the room will keep them from seeing me.

"I hope you've been practicing," Balekin says.

My eyes open into slits. Cardan is standing beside the bookshelves, a bland-faced male servant holding a court sword with gold engraving along the hilt and metal wings making the shape of the guard. I have to bite my tongue to keep from making some sound.

"Must we?" Cardan asks. He sounds bored.

"Show me what you've learned." Balekin lifts a single staff from a vessel beside his desk that holds an assortment of staves and canes. "All you have to do is get a single hit in. Just one, little brother."

Cardan just stands there.

"Pick up the sword." Balekin's patience is worn thin already.

With a long-suffering sigh, Cardan lifts the blade. His stance is terrible. I can see why Balekin is annoyed. Surely Cardan must have been given fighting tutors since he was old enough to hold a stick in his hands. I was taught from the time I got to Faerie, so he'd have had years on me, and the first thing I learned was where to put my feet.

Balekin raises his staff. "Now, attack."

For a long moment, they stand still, regarding each other. Cardan swings his sword in a desultory manner, and Balekin brings down his staff hard, smacking him in the side of the head. I wince at the sound of the wood against his skull. Cardan staggers forward, baring his teeth. His cheek and one of his ears is red, all the way to the point.

“This is ridiculous,” Cardan says, spitting on the floor. “Why must we play this silly game? Or do you like this part? Is this what makes it fun for you?”

“Swordplay isn’t a game.” Balekin swings again. Cardan tries to jump back, but the staff catches the edge of his thigh.

Cardan winces, bringing up his sword defensively. “Then why call it sword*play*?”

Balekin’s face darkens, and his grip on the staff tightens. This time he jabs Cardan in the stomach, striking suddenly and with enough force for Cardan to sprawl on the stone floor. “I have tried to improve you, but you insist on wasting your talents on revels, on being drunk under the moonlight, on your thoughtless rivalries and your pathetic romances—”

Cardan pushes himself to his feet and rushes at his brother, swinging his sword wildly. He wields it like a club. The sheer frenzy of the attack makes Balekin fall back a step.

Cardan’s technique finally shows. He becomes more deliberate, attacking from new angles. He’s never shown much interest in swordsmanship at school, and, although he knows the basics, I am not sure he practices. Balekin disarms him ruthlessly and efficiently. Cardan’s sword flies from his hand, clattering across the floor toward me.

I scuttle back deeper into the shadows of the chair. For a moment, I think that I am going to be caught, but the servant is the one to pick up the blade, and his gaze does not waver.

Balekin cracks his staff against the back of Cardan’s legs, sending him to the ground.

I am delighted. There’s a part of me that wishes I were the one wielding that staff.

“Don’t bother to rise.” Balekin unbuckles his belt and hands it over to the servant. The human man wraps it twice around his palm. “You have failed the test. Again.”

Cardan doesn’t speak. His eyes are glittering with a familiar rage, but for once it isn’t directed at me. He’s on his knees, but he doesn’t appear in any way cowed.

“Tell me.” Balekin’s voice has gone silky, and he paces around his younger brother. “When will you cease being a disappointment?”

“Maybe when you stop pretending that you don’t do this for your own pleasure,” Cardan answers. “If you want to hurt me, it would save us both a lot of time if you got right down to—”

“Father was old and his seed weak when he sired you. That’s why you’re weak.” Balekin puts one hand on his brother’s neck. It looks affectionate, until I see Cardan’s flinch, the shifting of his balance. That’s when I realize Balekin is pressing down hard, pinning Cardan in place on the floor. “Now, take off your shirt and receive your punishment.”

Cardan begins to strip off his shirt, showing an expanse of moon-pale skin and a back with a delicate tracery of faded scars.

My stomach lurches. They’re going to beat him.

I should be glorying in seeing Cardan like this. I should be glad that his life sucks, maybe worse than mine, even though he’s a prince of Faerie and a horrible jerk and probably going to live forever. If someone had told me that I’d get an opportunity to see this, I would have thought the only thing I’d have to stifle was applause.

But watching, I cannot help observing that beneath his defiance is fear. I know what it is to say the clever thing because you don’t want anyone to know how scared you are. It doesn’t make me like him any better, but for the first time he seems real. Not good, but real.

Balekin nods. The servant strikes twice, the slap of the leather echoing loudly in the still air of the room.

“I don’t order this because I am angry with you, brother,” Balekin tells Cardan, causing me to shudder. “I do it because I love you. I do it because I love our family.”

When the servant lifts his arm to strike a third time, Cardan lunges for his blade, resting on Balekin’s desk where the servant put it. For a moment, I think Cardan is going to run the human man straight through.

The servant does not cry out or lift his hands to protect himself. Maybe he is too ensorcelled for that. Maybe Cardan could stab him right through the heart and he wouldn’t do a single thing to defend himself. I am weak with horror.

“Go ahead,” Balekin says, bored. He makes a vague gesture toward the servant. “Kill him. Show me you don’t mind making a mess. Show me that at least you know how to land a killing blow on such a pathetic target as this.”

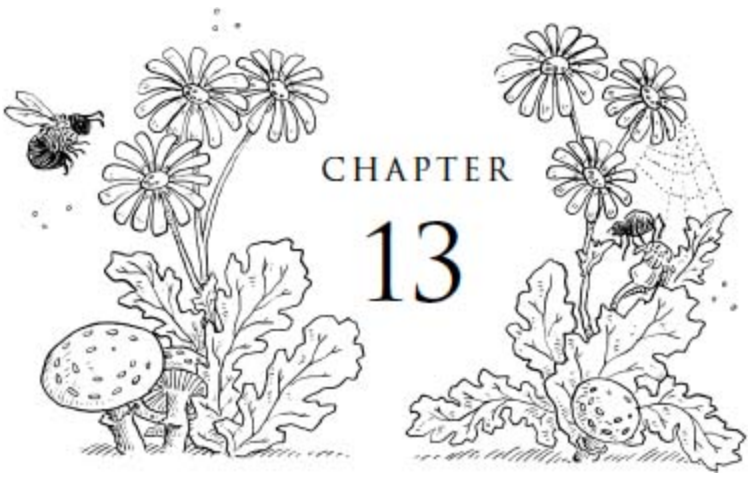
“I am no murderer,” says Cardan, surprising me. I would not have thought that was something to be proud of.

In two strides, Balekin is in front of his brother. They look so alike, standing close. Same inky hair, matching sneers, devouring eyes. But Balekin shows his decades of experience, wrenching the sword from Cardan’s hands and knocking him to the ground with the crossbar.

“Then take your punishment like the pathetic creature that you are.” Balekin nods to the servant, who rouses from somnolence.

I watch every blow, every flinch. I have little choice. I can shut my eyes, but the sounds are just as terrible. And worst of all is Cardan’s empty face, his eyes as dull as lead.

Truly, he has come by his cruelty honestly in Balekin’s care. He has been raised up in it, instructed in its nuances, honed through its application. However horrible Cardan might be, I now see what he might become and am truly afraid.



Disturbingly, it is even easier to gain entrance to the Palace of Elfhame in my servant's gown than it was to enter Balekin's household. Everyone, from goblin to the Gentry to the High King's mortal Court Poet and Seneschal, barely gives me a passing look as I find my clumsy way through the labyrinthine halls. I am nothing, no one, a messenger no more worthy of attention than an animated twig woman or an owl. My pleasant, placid expression, combined with forward momentum, gets me to Prince Dain's chambers without so much as a second look, even though I lose my way twice and have to retrace my steps.

I rap on his door and am relieved when the prince himself opens it.

He raises both brows, taking in the sight of me in the homespun dress. I make a formal curtsy, as any servant might. I do not alter my expression, for fear of his not being alone. "Yes?" he asks.

"I am here with a message for you, Your Highness," I say, hoping that sounds right. "I beg for a moment of your time."

"You're a natural," he tells me, grinning. "Come inside."

It's a relief to relax my face. I drop the inane smile as I follow him into his parlor.

Furnished in elaborate velvets, silks, and brocades, it's a riot of scarlet and deep blues and greens, everything rich and dark, like overripe fruit. The

patterns on the material are the sorts of things I have become accustomed to—intricate braids of briars, leaves that might also be spiders when you looked at them from another angle, and a depiction of a hunt where it is unclear which of the creatures is hunting the other.

I sigh and sit down in the chair he is pointing me toward, fumbling in my pocket.

"Here," I say, drawing out the folded-up note and smoothing it against the top of a cunning little table with carved bird feet for legs. "He came in while I was copying it, so it's kind of a mess." I had left the stolen book with the toad; the last thing I want Prince Dain to know is that I took something for myself.

Dain squints to see the shapes of the letters past my smudges. "And he didn't see you?"

"He was distracted," I say truthfully. "I hid."

He nods and rings a small bell, probably to summon a servant. I will be glad of anyone not ensorcelled. "Good. And did you enjoy it?"

I am not sure what to make of that question. I was frightened pretty much the whole time—how is that enjoyable? But the longer I think about it, the more I realize that I *did* sort of enjoy it. Most of my life is dreadful anticipation, a waiting for the other shoe to drop—at home, in classes, with the Court. Being afraid I would be caught spying was an entirely new sensation, one where I felt, at least, as though I knew exactly what to be scared of. I knew what it would take to win. Sneaking through Balekin's house had been less frightening than some revels.

At least until I'd watched Cardan get beaten. Then I'd felt something I don't want to examine too closely.

"I liked doing a good job," I say, finally finding an honest answer.

That makes Dain nod. He's about to tell me something else when another faerie enters the room. A male goblin, scarred, his skin the green of ponds. His nose is long and twists fully around, before bending back toward his face like a scythe. His hair is a black tuft at the very crown of his head. His eyes are unreadable. He blinks several times, as though trying to focus on me.

"They call me the Roach," he says, his voice melodious, completely at odds with his face. He bows and then cocks the side of his head toward Dain. "At his service. I guess we both are. You're the new girl, right?"

I nod. “Am I supposed to tell you my name, or am I supposed to come up with something clever?”

The Roach grins, which twists his whole face up even more hideously. “I am supposed to take you to meet the troupe. And don’t worry about what we’re going to call you. We decide that for ourselves. You think anyone in their right mind would want to be called the Roach?”

“Great,” I say, and sigh.

He gives me a long look. “Yeah, I can see how that’s a real talent. Not having to say what you mean.”

He’s dressed in an imitation of a court doublet, except his doublet is made from scraps of leather. I wonder what Madoc would say if he knew where I was and with whom. I do not think he would be pleased.

I don’t think he’d be pleased by anything I did today. Soldiers have a peculiar kind of honor, even those who dip their caps in the blood of their enemies. Sneaking around houses and stealing papers is not at all in line with it. Even though Madoc has spies of his own, I don’t think he’d like my being one.

“So he’s been blackmailing Queen Orlagh,” Dain says, and the Roach and I look over at him.

Prince Dain is frowning over the letter, and suddenly I understand—he recognizes my copy of the handwriting. Nicasia’s mother, Queen Orlagh, must be the woman who obtained poison for Balekin. She wrote that she was repaying a debt, although knowing Nicasia, I would guess a little nastiness wouldn’t give her mother much pause. But the Queen of the Undersea’s kingdom is vast and mighty. It is hard to imagine what Balekin could have over her.

Dain hands my letter to the Roach. “So do you still believe he will use it before the coronation?”

The goblin’s nose quivers. “That’s the smart move. Once the crown is on your head, nothing’s going to get it off.”

Until that moment, I hadn’t been sure whom the poison was for. I open my mouth and then bite the side of my cheek to stop myself from saying something foolish. Of course it must be for Prince Dain. Whom else would Balekin need some special poison to kill? If he were going to put regular people to death, he’d probably use some kind of cheap, regular-person poison.

Dain seems to notice my surprise. “We have never gotten along, my brother and I. He has always been too ambitious for that. And yet I had hoped …” He waves his hand around, dismissing whatever he was about to say. “Poison may be a coward’s weapon, but it is an effective one.”

“What about Princess Elowyn?” I ask, and then wish I could take back the question. Poison for her, too, probably. Queen Orlagh must have a cartload of it.

This time, Dain doesn’t answer me.

“Maybe Balekin plans on marrying her,” the Roach says, surprising us both. At our expressions, he shrugs. “What? If he makes things too obvious, he’s going to be the next one to get a knife in the back. And he wouldn’t be the first member of the Gentry to wed a sister.”

“If he marries her,” Dain says, laughing for the first time in this conversation, “he’ll get a knife in the front.”

I had always thought of Elowyn as the gentle sister. Again, I am aware of how little I really know about the world I am trying to navigate.

“Come,” says the Roach, waving me to my feet. “It’s time you met the others.”

I cast a plaintive look in Dain’s direction. I don’t want to go with the Roach, whom I have just met and whom I am not at all sure I trust. Even I, who have grown up in the house of a redcap, fear goblins.

“Before you go.” Dain walks over until he’s standing directly in front of me. “I promised that none might compel you, save for me. I am afraid I am going to have to use that power. Jude Duarte, I forbid you from speaking aloud about your service to me. I forbid you from putting it into writing or into song. You will never tell anyone of the Roach. You will never tell anyone of any of my spies. You will never reveal their secrets, their meeting places, their safe houses. So long as I live, you will obey this.”

I am wearing my necklace of rowan berries, but they are no protection against the magic of the geas. This is no regular glamour, no simple sorcery.

The weight of the geas slams down on me, and I know that if I tried to speak, my mouth wouldn’t be able to form those forbidden words. I hate it. It’s an awful, out-of-control feeling. It makes me scramble around in my head, trying to imagine my way around his commandment, but I cannot.

I think of my first ride to Faerie and the sound of Taryn and Vivi wailing. I think of Madoc’s grim expression, jaw locked, doubtlessly unused to

children, no less human ones. His ears must have been ringing. He must have wanted us to shut up. It's hard to think anything good about Madoc in that moment, with our parents' heartsblood on his hands. But I will say this for him—he never enchanted away our grief or took our voices. He never did any of the things that might have made the trip easier for him.

I try to convince myself that Prince Dain is only doing the smart thing, the necessary thing, in binding me. But it makes my skin crawl.

For a moment, I am unsure of my decision to serve him.

"Oh," Dain says as I am about to leave. "One more thing. Do you know what mithridatism is?"

I shake my head, not sure I am interested in anything he has to say right now.

"Look into it." He smiles. "That's not a command, only a suggestion."

I follow the Roach through the palace, keeping back from him a few steps so it doesn't seem like we're together. We pass a general Madoc knows, and I make sure to keep my head bowed. I don't think he would look closely enough to recognize me, but I cannot be sure.

"Where are we going?" I whisper after several minutes of walking through the halls.

"Just a little farther," he says gruffly, opening a cupboard and climbing inside. His eyes reflect orange, like a bear's. "Well, come on, get in and close the door."

"I can't see in the dark," I remind him, because that is one of the many things the Folk never remember about us.

He grunts.

I get in, folding myself up tightly so that no part of me touches him, and then I close the cabinet door behind me. I hear the slide of wood and feel the rush of cold, damp air. The scent of wet stone fills the space.

His hand on my arm is careful, but I can feel his claws. I let him pull me forward, allow him to press my head so I know when to duck. When I straighten out, I am on a narrow platform above what appears to be the palace's wine cellars.

My eyes are still adjusting, but from what I can see, there is a network of passageways worming below the palace. I wonder how many people know about them. I smile at the thought of having a secret about this place. Me, of all people.

I wonder if Madoc knows.

I bet Cardan doesn't.

I grin, wider than before.

"Enough gawping?" the Roach asks. "I can wait."

"Are you ready to tell me anything?" I ask him. "Like, where we're going or what's going to happen when we get there?"

"Figure it out," he says, the growl in his voice. "Go on."

"You said we were going to meet the others," I tell him, starting with what I know, trying to keep up and avoid stumbling on the uneven ground. "And Prince Dain made me promise not to reveal any hidden locations, so obviously we're going to your lair. But that doesn't tell me what we're going to do when we get there."

"Maybe we're going to show you secret handshakes," the Roach says. He's doing something I can't quite see, but a moment later, I hear a click—as though a lock was tripped or a trap disarmed. A gentle shove against the small of my back and I am heading down a new, even more dimly lit tunnel.

I know when we come to a door because I walk straight into it, much to the Roach's amusement. "You really can't see," he says.

I rub my forehead. "I told you I couldn't!"

"Yes, but you're the liar," he reminds me. "I'm not supposed to believe anything you say."

"Why would I lie about something like that?" I demand, still annoyed.

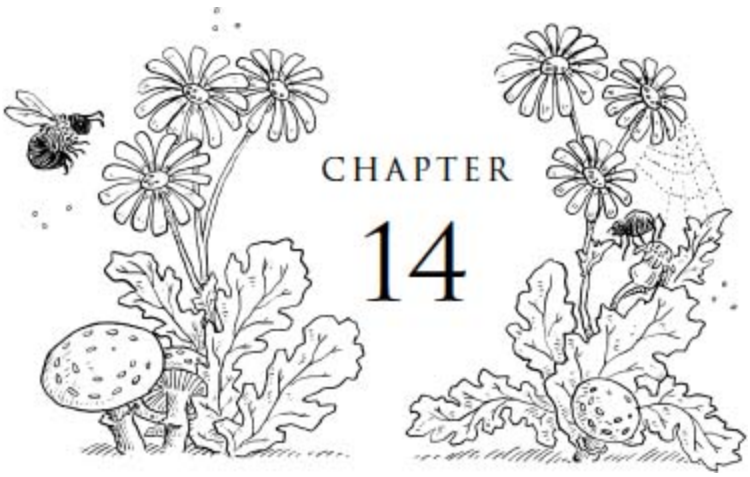
He lets my question hang in the air. The answer is obvious—so I could retrace my steps. So he might accidentally show me something he wouldn't show someone else. So that he would be incautious.

I really need to stop asking stupid questions.

And maybe he really needs to be less paranoid, since Dain put a geas on me so I can't tell anyone no matter what.

The Roach opens the door, and light floods the hallway, causing me to throw my arm up in front of my face. Blinking, I look into the secret lair of Prince Dain's spies. It's packed earth on all four sides, with walls that curve inward and a rounded ceiling. A large table dominates the room, and sitting at it are two faeries I've never met—both of them gazing at me unhappily.

"Welcome," says the Roach, "to the Court of Shadows."



CHAPTER 14

The two other members of Dain's spy troupe also have code names. There's the lean, handsome faerie that looks at least part human, who winks and tells me to call him the Ghost. He has sandy-colored hair, which is normal for a mortal but is unusual for a faerie, and ears that come to very subtle points.

The other is a tiny, delicate girl, her skin the dappled brown of a doe, her hair a cloud of white around her head, and a miniature pair of blue-gray butterfly wings on her back. She's got at least some pixie in her, if not some imp.

I recognize her now from the High King's full moon revel. She's the one who stole a belt from an ogre, weapons and pouches attached.

"I'm the Bomb," she says. "I like blowing things up."

I nod. It's the kind of blunt thing I don't expect faeries to say, but I am used to being around Court faeries with their baroque etiquette. I am not used to the solitary fey. I am at a loss as to how to speak with them. "So is it just the three of you?"

"Four now," says the Roach. "We make sure Prince Dain stays alive and well informed about the doings of the Court. We steal, sneak, and deceive to secure his coronation. And when he is king, we will steal, sneak, and deceive to make sure he stays on the throne."

I nod. After seeing what Balekin is like, I want Dain on the throne more than ever. Madoc will be by his side, and if I can make myself useful enough, maybe they'll get the rest of the Gentry off my back.

"You can do two things the rest of us can't," the Roach says. "One, you can blend in with the human servants. Two, you can move among the Gentry. We're going to teach you some other tricks. So until you get another mission directly from the prince, your job is what I say it is."

I nod. I expected something like that. "I can't always get away. I skipped classes today, but I can't do that all the time or someone will notice and ask where I've been. And Madoc expects me to have dinner with him and Oriana and the rest of the family around midnight."

The Roach looks over at the Ghost and shrugs. "This is always the problem with infiltrating the Court. Lots of etiquette taking up time. When *can* you get away?"

"I could sneak out after I'm supposed to be in bed," I tell them.

"Good enough," the Roach says. "One of us will meet you near the house and either train you or give you assignments. You need not always come here, to the nest." The Ghost nods, as though my problems are reasonable, part of the job, but I feel childish. They are a child's problems.

"So let's initiate her," the Bomb says, walking up to me.

I catch my breath. Whatever happens next, I can endure it. I have endured more than they can guess.

But the Bomb only starts laughing, and the Roach gives her a playful shove.

The Ghost gives me a sympathetic look and shakes his head. His eyes, I notice, are a shifting hazel. "If Prince Dain says you are part of the Court of Shadows, then you are. Try not to be too much of a disappointment and we'll have your back."

I let out my breath. I am not sure that I wouldn't have preferred some ordeal, some way to prove myself.

The Bomb makes a face. "You'll know you're really one of us when you get your name. Don't expect it anytime soon."

The Ghost goes over to a cabinet and takes out a half-empty bottle of a pale greenish liquid and a stack of polished acorn cups. He pours out four shots. "Have a drink. And don't worry," he tells me. "It won't befuddle you any more than any other drink."

I shake my head, thinking of the way I felt after having the golden apple mashed into my face. Never do I want to feel out of control like that again. “I’ll pass.”

The Roach knocks back his drink and makes a face, as though the liquor is scorching his throat. “Suit yourself,” he manages to choke out before he starts to cough.

The Ghost barely winces at the contents of his acorn. The Bomb is taking tiny sips of hers. From her expression, I am extra glad I passed on it.

“Balekin’s going to be a problem,” the Roach says, explaining what I found.

The Bomb puts down her acorn. “I mislike everything about this. If he was going to go to Eldred, he would have done it already.”

I had not considered that he might poison his father.

The Ghost stretches his lanky body as he gets up. “It’s getting late. I should take the girl home.”

“Jude,” I remind him.

He grins. “I know a shortcut.”

We go back into the tunnels, and following him is a challenge because, as his name suggests, he moves almost completely silently. Several times, I think he’s left me alone in the tunnels, but just when I am about to stop walking, I hear the faintest exhalation of breath or shuffle of dirt and persuade myself to go on.

After what feels like an agonizingly long time, a doorway opens. The Ghost is standing in it, and beyond him is the High King’s wine cellar. He makes a small bow.

“This is your shortcut?” I ask.

He winks. “If a few bottles happen to fall into my satchel as we pass through, that’s hardly my fault, is it?”

I force out a laugh, the sound creaky and false in my ears. I’m not used to one of the Folk including me in their jokes, at least not outside my family. I like to believe that I am doing okay here in Faerie. I like to believe that even though I was drugged and nearly murdered at school yesterday, I am able to put that behind me today. I’m fine.

But if I can’t laugh, maybe I’m not so fine after all.

I change into the blue shift I packed in the woods outside Madoc's grounds, despite being so tired that my joints hurt. I wonder if the Folk are ever tired like that, if they ever ache after a long evening. The toad seems exhausted, too, although maybe she's just full. As far as I can tell, most of what she did today was snap her tongue at passing butterflies and a mouse or two.

It's full deep dark when I get back to the estate. The trees are lit with tiny sprites, and I see a laughing Oak racing through them, pursued by Vivi and Taryn and—*oh hell*—Locke. It's disorienting to see him here, impossibly out of context. Has he come because of me?

With a shriek, Oak dashes over, clamoring up the saddlebags and onto my lap.

"Chase me!" he yells, out of breath, full of the wriggling ecstasy of childhood.

Even faeries are young once.

Impulsively, I hug him to my chest. He's warm and smells of grass and deep woods. He lets me do it for a moment, small arms twining around my neck, small horned head butting against my chest. Then, laughing, he slides down and away, throwing a puckish glance back to see if I'll follow.

Growing up here, in Faerie, will he learn to scorn mortals? When I am old and he is still young, will he scorn me, too? Will he become cruel like Cardan? Will he become brutal like Madoc?

I have no way of knowing.

I step off the toad, foot in the stirrup as I swing my body down. I pat just above her nose, and her golden eyes drift shut. In fact, she seems a little like she might be asleep until I yank on the reins, leading her back toward the stables.

"Hello," Locke says, jogging up to me. "Now, where might you have gone off to?"

"None of your business," I tell him, but I soften the words with a smile. I can't help it.

"Ah! A lady of mystery. My very favorite kind." He's wearing a green doublet, with slits to show his silk shirt underneath. His fox eyes are alight. He looks like a faerie lover stepped out of a ballad, the kind where no good

comes to the girl who runs away with him. “I hope you’ll consider returning to classes tomorrow,” he says.

Vivi continues to chase Oak, but Taryn has stopped near a large elm tree. She watches me with the same expression she had on the tournament field, as though if she concentrates hard enough, she can will me into not offending Locke.

“You mean so your friends know they haven’t chased me off?” I say. “Does it matter?”

He looks at me oddly. “You’re playing the great game of kings and princes, of queens and crowns, aren’t you? Of course it matters. Everything matters.”

I am not sure how to interpret his words. I didn’t think I was playing that kind of game at all. I thought I was playing the game of pissing off people who hated me already and eating the consequences.

“Come back. You and Taryn both should return. I told her so.” I turn my head, looking for my twin in the yard, but she is no longer by the elm. Vivi and Oak are disappearing over a hill. Perhaps she has gone with them.

We get to the stables, and I return the toad to her pen. I fill her water station from a barrel in the center of the room, and a fine mist appears, raining down on her soft skin. The horses nicker and stamp as we leave. Locke watches this all in silence.

“May I ask you something else?” Locke says, glancing in the direction of the manor.

I nod.

“Why haven’t you told your father what’s been happening?” Madoc’s stables are very impressive. Maybe standing in them, Locke was reminded of just how much power and influence the general has. But that doesn’t mean I am the inheritor of that power. Maybe Locke should also remember that I am merely one of the by-blow children of Madoc’s human wife. Without Madoc and his honor, no one would care about me.

“You mean so he can go stomping into our classes with a broadsword, killing everyone in sight?” I ask, instead of correcting Locke about my station in life.

Locke’s eyes widen. I guess that wasn’t what he meant. “I thought that your father would pull you out—and that if you didn’t tell him, it was because you wanted to stay.”

I give a short laugh. “That’s not what he’d do at all. Madoc is not a fan of surrender.”

In the cool dark of the stables, with the snorting of faerie horses all around us, he takes my hands. “Nothing there would be the same without you.”

Since I never intended to quit, it’s nice to have someone making all this effort to get me to do something I would have done anyway. And the way he’s looking at me, the intensity of it, is so nice that I am embarrassed. No one has ever looked at me this way.

I can feel the heat of my cheeks and wonder if the shadows help cover it up at all. Right then, I feel as though he sees everything—every hope of my heart, every stray thought I’ve had before falling into an exhausted sleep each dawn.

He brings one of my hands up to his mouth and presses his lips against my palm. My whole body tenses. I am suddenly too warm, too everything. His breath is a soft susurration against my skin.

With a gentle tug, he pulls me closer. His arm is around me. He leans in for a kiss and my thoughts slide away.

This can’t be happening.

“Jude?” I hear Taryn call uncertainly from nearby, and I stagger away from Locke. “Jude? Are you still in the stable?”

“Here,” I say, my face hot. We emerge into the night to find Oriana on the steps of the house, hauling Oak inside. Vivi is waving to him as he tries to squirm free from his mother’s grip. Taryn has her hands on her hips.

“Oriana has called everyone in to dinner,” Taryn informs us both grandly. “She wants Locke to stay and eat with us.”

He makes a bow. “You may inform your lady mother that though I am honored to be asked to her table, I would not so impose myself on her. I only wanted to speak with you both. I will, however, call again. You may be sure of that.”

“You talked to Jude about school?” There is trepidation in Taryn’s voice. I wonder what they spoke about before I returned. I wonder if he persuaded her to attend the lectures again, and if so, how he did it.

“Until tomorrow,” he says to us with a wink.

I watch him walk off, still overwhelmed. I don’t dare look at Taryn, for fear she will see all of it on my face, the whole day’s events, the almost

kiss. I am not ready to talk, so I am the one who avoids her for once. Skipping up the steps with as much nonchalance as I can muster, I head to my room to change for dinner.

I forgot that I asked Madoc to teach me swordplay and strategy, but after dinner he gives me a stack of military history books from his personal library.

“When you’re done reading these, we will talk,” he informs me. “I will set you a series of challenges, and you will tell me how you might overcome them with the resources I give you.”

I think he expects me to object and insist on more swordplay, but I am too tired to even think of it.

Flopping down on my bed an hour later, I decide that I am not going to even take off the blue silk dress I am wearing. My hair is still disarranged, although I tried to improve it with a few pretty pins. I should take those out, at least, I tell myself, but I can’t seem to make any movement toward doing so.

My door opens, and Taryn comes in, hopping up onto my bed.

“Okay,” she says, poking me in the side. “What did Locke want? He said he had to talk to you.”

“He’s nice,” I say, rolling over and folding my arms behind my head, staring up at the folds of fabric gathered above me. “Not totally Cardan’s puppet like the rest of them.”

Taryn has an odd expression on her face, like she wants to contradict me but is holding herself back. “Whatever. Spill.”

“About Locke?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes. “About what happened with him and his friends.”

“They’re never going to respect me if I don’t fight back,” I tell her.

She sighs. “They’re never going to respect you, period.”

I think of crawling across the grass, my knees dirty, the savor of the fruit in my mouth. Even now I can taste the echo of it, the emptiness it would fill, the giddy, delirious joy it promises.

Taryn goes on. “You came home practically naked yesterday, smeared with faerie fruit. Isn’t that bad enough? Don’t you care?” Taryn has pulled her whole body back against one of the posts of my bed.

“I am tired of caring,” I say. “Why should I?”

“Because they could kill you!”

“They better,” I say to her. “Because anything less than that isn’t going to work.”

“Do you have a plan for stopping them?” she asks. “You said you were going to defy Cardan by being your awesome self and if he tried to take you down, you’d take him down with you. How are you going to manage that?”

“I don’t know exactly,” I admit.

She throws up her hands in frustration.

“No, look,” I say. “Every day that I don’t beg Cardan for forgiveness over a feud he started is a day I win. He can humiliate me, but every time he does and I don’t back down, he makes himself less powerful. After all, he’s throwing everything he’s got at someone as weak as I am and it’s not working. He’s going to take himself down.”

She sighs and comes over to me, laying her head against my chest, putting her arms around me. Against my shoulder she whispers, “He’s flint, you’re tinder.”

I hug her closer and make no promises.

We stay like that for a long moment.

“Did Locke threaten you?” she asks softly. “It was so odd that he came here looking for you, and then you had such a weird expression when I walked into the stables.”

“No, nothing bad,” I tell her. “I don’t know exactly what he came for, but he kissed my hand. It was nice, like out of a storybook.”

“Nice things don’t happen in storybooks,” Taryn says. “Or when they do happen, something bad happens next. Because otherwise the story would be boring, and no one would read it.”

It’s my turn to sigh. “I know it’s stupid, thinking well of one of Cardan’s friends, but he really did help me. He stood up to Cardan. But I’d rather talk about you. There’s someone, isn’t there? When you said you were going to fall in love, you were talking about someone in particular.”

Not that I’ d be the first to green gown her.

“There’s a boy,” she says slowly. “He’s going to declare himself at Prince Dain’s coronation. He’s going to ask for my hand from Madoc, and then everything is going to change for me.”

I think of her weeping, standing beside Cardan. I think of how angry she’s been that I am feuding with him. I think of that, and a cold and terrible dread creeps over me. “*Who?*” I demand.

Please not Cardan. Anyone but Cardan.

“I promised not to tell anyone,” she says. “Even you.”

“Our promises don’t matter,” I say, thinking of Prince Dain’s geas still freezing my tongue, of how little any of them trust us. “No one expects us to have any honor. Everyone knows we lie.”

She gives me a stern, disapproving look. “It’s a faerie prohibition. If I break it, he’ll know. I need to show him I can live like one of the Folk.”

“Okay,” I say slowly.

“Be happy for me,” she says, and I feel cut to the quick. She has found her place in Faerie, and I guess I have found mine. But I can’t help worrying.

“Just tell me something about him. Tell me that he is kind. Tell me that you love him and that he’s promised to be good to you. Tell me.”

“He’s a faerie,” she says. “They don’t love the way we do. And I think you would like him—there, that’s something.”

That doesn’t sound like Cardan, whom I despise. But I am not sure I find her answer reassuring, either.

What does it mean, I would like him? Does that mean we’ve never met? What does it mean that he doesn’t love the way we do?

“I *am* happy for you. Honest,” I say, although I am more worried than anything. “This is exciting. When Oriana’s dressmaker comes, you’re going to have to make sure you get an extra-pretty gown.”

Taryn relaxes. “I just want everything to be better. For both of us.”

I reach over to my bedside table to retrieve the book I stole from Hollow Hall. “Remember this?” I ask, lifting up the collected *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* book. When I do, a folded piece of paper slips out and flutters to the floor.

“We used to read that when we were little,” she says, grabbing for the book. “Where did you get it?”

“I found it,” I say, not able to explain whose bookshelf it had come from or why I had been in Hollow Hall in the first place. To test the geas, I try to say the words: *Spying for Prince Dain*. My mouth will not move. My tongue stays still. A wave of panic washes over me, but I push it back. This is a small price for what he’s given me.

Taryn doesn’t press for more information. She’s too busy flipping through the pages and reading bits of it aloud. While I can’t quite remember the cadence of my mother’s voice, I think I hear an echo of it in Taryn’s.

“*Now,* here, *you see, it takes all the running* you *can do, to keep in the same place*,” she reads. *“If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”*

I reach down surreptitiously and shove the fallen paper under my pillow. I plan to unfold it once she returns to her room, but instead I fall asleep, long before the story is over.

I wake in the early morning, alone, needing to pee. I pad into my bath area, lift my skirts, and do my business in the copper basin left there for this purpose, shame heating my face even though I am alone. It is one of the most humbling aspects of being human. I know that faeries are not gods—maybe I know that better than any mortal alive—but neither have I ever seen one hunched over a bedpan.

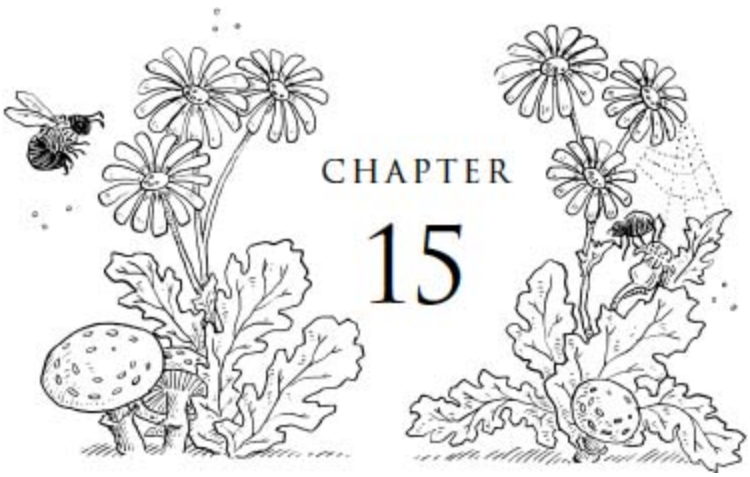
Back in bed, I push aside the curtain and let the sunlight spill in, brighter than any lamp. I take the folded-up paper from behind my pillow.

Smoothing it out, I see Cardan’s furious, arrogant handwriting scrawled over the page, taking up all available space. In some places he pressed the nib so angrily that the paper tore.

Jude, it reads, each hateful rendering of my name like a punch to the gut.

Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude

Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude
Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude Jude



CHAPTER 15

The dressmaker comes early the next afternoon, a long-fingered faerie called Brambleweft. Her feet are turned backward, giving her an odd gait. Her eyes are like those of a goat, brown with a horizontal line of black just at the center. She is wearing an example of her work, a woven dress with embroidered lines of thorns making a striped pattern down the length of it.

She has brought with her bolts of fabric, some of it stiff gold, one that changes color like iridescent beetle wings. Beside that, she tells us, is a spider silk so fine that it could have fit through the eye of a needle three times over and yet strong enough to have to be cut with silver scissors magicked to never lose their edge. The purple fabric shot through with gold and silver is so bright that it seems like moonlight itself puddling over the cushions.

All the fabrics are draped onto the couch in Oriana's parlor for us to inspect. Even Vivi is drawn to run her fingers over the cloth, an absent smile on her face. There is nothing like this in the mortal world, and she knows it.

Oriana's current maid, a hairy, wizened creature named Toadfloss, brings tea and cakes, meat and jam, all piled on a massive silver tray. I pour myself tea and drink it without cream, hoping it will settle my stomach. The terror of the last few days is at my heels, making me shudder without warning.

The memory of the faerie fruit keeps rising unbidden to my tongue, along with the cracked lips of the servants in Balekin's palace and the sound of the leather as it struck Prince Cardan's bare back.

And my own name, written over and over and over. I thought I knew how much Cardan hated me, but looking at that paper, I realized I had no idea. And he'd hate me even more still if he knew I had seen him on his knees, beaten by a human servant. A mortal, for an extra bit of humiliation, an extra dose of rage.

"Jude?" Oriana says, and I realize that I've been staring off toward the window and the fading light.

"Yes?" I put on a bright, false smile.

Taryn and Vivienne begin to laugh.

"And just who are you thinking about with a dreamy expression like that on your face?" Oriana asks, which makes Vivi laugh again. Taryn doesn't, probably because she thinks I am an idiot.

I shake my head, hoping I have not gone red-faced. "No, it wasn't anything like that. I was just—I don't know. It doesn't matter. What were we talking about?"

"The seamstress wishes to measure you first," Oriana says. "Since you're the youngest."

I look over at Brambleweft, who holds a string between her hands. I hop up onto the box she has set before her, holding out my arms. I am a good daughter today. I am going to get a pretty gown. I will dance at Prince Dain's coronation until my feet bleed.

"Don't scowl," the seamstress says. Before I can stammer apologies, she continues, voice pitched low. "I was told to sew this dress with pockets that can conceal weapons and poisons and other little necessities. We'll make sure that's done while still showing you to great advantage."

I almost stumble off the box, I am so surprised. "That's wonderful," I whisper back, knowing better than to thank her. Faeries don't believe in dismissing gratitude with a few words. They believe in debts and bargains, and the person I am meant to be most indebted to is not here. Prince Dain is the one who expects to be repaid.

She smiles, pins in her mouth, and I grin back at her. I will repay him, although it seems I will have much to repay him for. I will make him proud of me. Everyone else, I will make very, very sorry.

When I look up, Vivi is watching me suspiciously. Taryn is next to be measured. As she gets on the box, I go and drink more tea. Then I eat three sugary cakes and a strip of ham.

“Where did you go the other day?” Vivi asks as I gulp down the meat like some kind of raptor bird. I have woken ravenous.

I think of how I fled from our conversation on my way to Hollow Hall. I can’t exactly deny that, not without explaining more about where I was going than my geased tongue will allow. I shrug, one-shouldered.

“I made one of the other Gentry kids describe what happened to you at that lecture,” Vivi says. “You could have died. The only reason you’re alive is that they didn’t want their game to be over.”

“That’s the way they are,” I remind her. “That’s the way things are. Do you want the world to be different than it is? Because this is the world we get, Vivi.”

“It’s not the only world,” she says softly.

“It’s *my* world,” I say, my heart hammering in my chest. I stand before she can tell me otherwise. My hands are shaking, though, and my palms are sweaty when I go to finger the fabrics.

Ever since I staggered home through the woods in my underwear, I have been trying to feel nothing about what happened. I am afraid that if I begin to feel, I won’t be able to bear it. I am afraid that the emotion will be like a wave sucking me under.

It’s not the first awful thing I have endured and pushed into the back of my brain. That’s how I’ve been coping, and if there’s another, better way, I do not know it.

I focus my attention on the cloth until I can breathe evenly again, until the panic dissipates. There’s a velvet blue-green, reminding me of the lake at dusk. I find an amazing, fantastical fabric embroidered with moths and butterflies and ferns and flowers. I lift it up, and underneath is a bolt of beautiful fog-gray cloth that ripples like smoke. They’re so very pretty. The kind of fabrics that princesses in fairy tales wear.

Of course, Taryn is right about stories. Bad things happen to those princesses. They are pricked with thorns, poisoned by apples, married to their own fathers. They have their hands cut off and their brothers turned into swans, their lovers chopped up and planted in basil pots. They vomit up diamonds. When they walk, it feels as though they’re walking on knives.

They still manage to look nice.

“I want that one,” Taryn says, pointing to the bolt of fabric I’m holding, the one with the embroidery. She’s done being measured. Vivi is up there, holding out her arms, watching me in that unnerving way she has, as though she knows my very thoughts.

“Your sister found it first,” Oriana says.

“Pleeeeeeeease,” Taryn says to me, bending her head and looking up through her eyelashes. She’s joking, but she’s not. She needs to look nice for this boy who is supposed to declare himself at the coronation. She doesn’t understand what use my looking nice would be, me with my grudges and feuds.

With a half smile, I set down the bolt. “Sure. All yours.”

Taryn kisses me on the cheek. I guess we’re back to normal. If only everything in my life were so easily resolved.

I choose a different cloth, the dark blue velvet. Vivienne chooses a violet that seems to be a silvery gray when she turns it over her hand. Oriana chooses a blush pink for herself and a cricket green for Oak. Brambleweft starts to sketch—billowing skirts and cunning little capes, corsets stitched with fanciful creatures. Butterflies alighting along arms and in elaborate headpieces. I am charmed at the alien vision of myself—my corset will have two golden beetles stitched in what looks like a breastplate, with Madoc’s moon crest and elaborate swirls of shining thread continuing down my front, and tiny sheer drop sleeves of more gold.

It will certainly be clear to what household I belong.

We are still making small changes when Oak runs in, being chased by Gnarbone. Oak spots me first and scrambles onto my lap, throwing his arms around my neck and giving me a small bite just beneath my shoulder.

“Ow!” I say in surprise, but he just laughs. It makes me laugh, too. He’s kind of a weird kid, maybe because he’s a faerie or maybe because all kids, human or inhuman, are equally weird. “Do you want me to tell you a story about a little boy who bit a stone and lost all his pearly white teeth?” I ask him in what I hope is a menacing fashion, sticking my fingers under his armpits to tickle him.

“Yes,” he says immediately between breathless giggles and shrieks.

Oriana strides over to us, her face full of trouble. “That’s very kind of you, but we ought to begin dressing for dinner.” She pulls him off my lap

and into her arms. He begins screaming and kicking his legs. One of the kicks lands against my stomach hard enough to bruise, but I don't say anything.

"Story!" he shouts. "I want the story!"

"Jude is busy right now," she says, carrying his squirming body toward the door, where Gnarbone is waiting to take him back to the nursery.

"Why don't you ever trust me with him?" I shout, and Oriana wheels around, shocked that I said a thing we don't say. I am shocked, too, but I can't stop. "I'm not a monster! I've never done anything to either of you."

"I want the story," Oak whines, sounding confused.

"That's enough," Oriana says sternly, as though we've all been arguing. "We will speak about this later with your father."

With that, she strides from the room.

"I don't know whose father you're talking about, because he's sure not mine," I call after her.

Taryn's eyes go saucer-wide. Vivienne has a small smile on her face. She takes a minute sip of tea, and then she raises the cup in my direction in salute. The seamstress is looking down and away, leaving us to our private family moment.

I cannot seem to contort myself back into the shape of a dutiful child.

I am coming unraveled. I am coming undone.

The next day at school, Taryn walks beside me, swinging her lunch basket. I keep my head high and my jaw set. I have my little knife with me, cold iron, tucked into one of the pockets of my skirt, and more salt than I reasonably need. I even have a new necklace of rowan berries, sewn by Tatterfell and worn because there was no way she could know I didn't need it.

I dally in the palace garden to gather a few more things.

"Are you allowed to pick those?" Taryn asks, but I do not answer her.

In the afternoon, we attend a lecture in a high tower, where we are taught about birdsongs. Every time I feel as though my courage will falter, I let my fingers brush the cool metal of the blade.

Locke looks over, and when he catches my eye, he winks.

From the other side of the room, Cardan scowls at the lecturer but does not speak. When he moves to take an inkpot from a satchel, I see him wince. I think about how sore his back must be, how it must hurt to move. But if he holds himself a little more stiffly as he sneers, that seems to be the only difference in his manner.

He looks well practiced in hiding pain.

I think of the note I found, of the press of his nibbed pen hard enough to send flecks of ink spattering as he wrote my name. Hard enough to dig through the page, maybe to scar the desk beneath.

If that's what he did to the paper, I shudder to think what he wants to do to me.

After school, I practice with Madoc. He shows me a particularly clever block, and I do it over and over again, better and faster, surprising even him. When I go inside, covered in sweat, I pass Oak, who is running somewhere, dragging my stuffed snake after him on a dirty rope. He's clearly stolen the snake from my room.

"Oak!" I call after him, but he's up the stairs and away.

I sluice off in my bath and then, alone in my room, unpack my schoolbag. Tucked down in the bottom, wrapped in a leftover piece of paper, is a single worm-eaten faerie fruit I picked up on the way home. I set it on a tray and pull on leather gloves. Then I take out my knife and cut it into pieces. Tiny slivers of squishy golden fruit.

I have researched faerie poisons in dusty, hand-scribed books in Madoc's library. I read about the blusher mushroom, a pale fungus that blooms with beads of a red liquid that looks uncomfortably like blood. Small doses cause paralysis, while large doses are lethal, even for the Folk. Then there is deathsweet, which causes a sleep that lasts a hundred years. And wraithberry, which makes your blood race until your heart stops. And faerie fruit, of course, which one book called everapple.

I take out a flask of pine liquor, nicked from the kitchens, thick and heavy as sap. I drop the fruit into it to keep it fresh.

My hands are shaking.

The final piece, I put on my tongue. The rush of it hits me hard, and I grit my teeth against it. Then, while I am feeling stupid, I take out the other things. A leaf of wraithberry from the palace garden. A petal from a flower of deathsweet. The tiniest bead of juice from the blusher mushroom. From each, I cut away a tinier portion and swallow.

Mithridatism, it's called. Isn't that a funny name? The process of eating poison to build up immunity. So long as I don't die from it, I'll be harder to kill.

I do not make it downstairs for dinner. I am too busy retching, too busy shivering and sweating.

I fall asleep in the bath area of my room, spread out on the floor. That's where the Ghost finds me. I wake to his poking me in the stomach with the foot of his boot. It's only grogginess that keeps me from crying out.

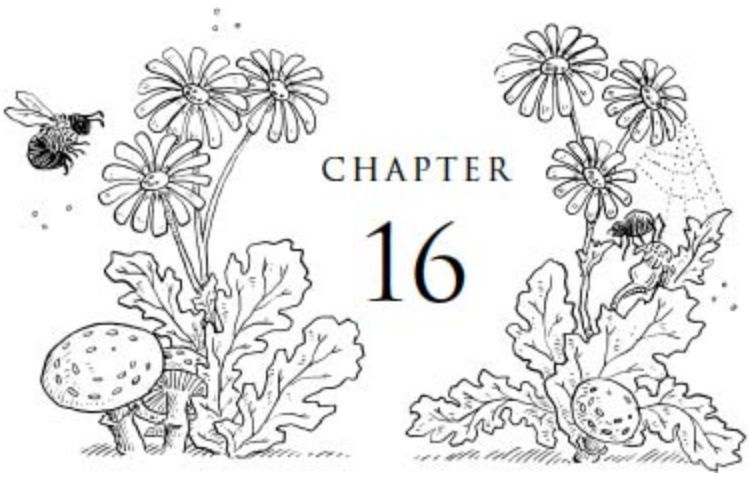
"Rise, Jude," the Ghost says. "The Roach wants you to train tonight."

I push myself up, too exhausted to disobey. Outside, on the dewy grass, with the first rays of sun creeping across the island, the Ghost shows me how to climb trees silently. How to put down a foot without snapping a branch or crackling a dried leaf. I thought I'd learned how in my lessons at the palace, but he shows me mistakes my teachers didn't bother correcting. I try, over and over. Mostly, I fail.

"Good," he says, once my muscles are shaking. He's spoken so little that his voice startles me. He could more easily pass for human than Vivi, with the subtler point on his ears, light brown hair, and hazel eyes. And yet he seems unknowable to me, both calmer and colder than she is. The sun is almost up. The leaves are turning to gold. "Keep practicing. Sneak up on your sisters." When he grins, with sandy hair falling over his face, he seems younger than I am, but I'm sure he's not.

And when he goes, he does it in such a way that it appears like vanishing. I head back home and use what I've just learned to slyfoot my way past the servants on the stairs. I make it to my room, and this time when I collapse, I manage to do it in my bed.

Then I get up the next day and do everything all over again.



CHAPTER 16

Attending lectures is harder than ever. For one thing, I am sick, my body fighting the effects of the fruit and the poisons I am forcing down. For another, I am exhausted from training with Madoc and training with Dain's Court of Shadows. Madoc gives me puzzles—twelve goblin knights to storm a fortress, nine untrained Gentry to defend one—and then asks for my answers each evening after dinner. The Roach orders me to practice moving through the crowds of courtiers without being noticed, to eavesdrop without seeming interested. The Bomb teaches me how to find the weak spot in a building, the pressure point on a body. The Ghost teaches me how to hang from rafters and not be seen, to line up a shot with a crossbow, to steady my shaking hands.

I am sent on two more missions to get information. First, I steal a letter addressed to Elowyn from a knight's desk in the palace. The next time, I wear the clothing of a faerie bride and walk through a party to the private chambers of the lovely Taracand, one of Prince Balekin's consorts, where I take a ring from a desk. In neither case am I allowed to know the significance of what I stole.

I attend lectures beside Cardan, Nicasia, Valerian, and all the Gentry children who laughed at my humiliation. I do not give them the satisfaction of my withdrawing, but since the incident with the faerie fruit, there are no

more skirmishes. I bide my time. I can only assume they are doing the same. I am not foolish enough to think we are done with one another.

Locke continues his flirtation. He sits with Taryn and me when we take our lunch, spread out on a blanket, watching the sun set. Occasionally he walks me home through the woods, stopping to kiss me near a copse of fir trees just before Madoc's estate. I only hope he doesn't taste the bitterness of poison on my lips.

I do not understand why he likes me, but it is exciting to be liked.

Taryn doesn't seem to understand it, either. She regards Locke with suspicion. Perhaps since I am worried over her mysterious paramour, it is fitting that she seems equally worried over mine.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" I overhear Nicasia ask Locke once, as he joins them for a lecture. "Cardan won't forgive you for what you're doing with her."

I pause, unable to pass by without listening for his answer.

But Locke only laughs. "Is he more angry that you chose me over him or that I chose a mortal over you?"

I startle, not sure I heard him right.

She's about to answer when she spots me. Her mouth curls. "Little mousie," she says. "Don't believe his sugared tongue."

The Roach would despair of me if he saw how badly I fumbled my newfound skills. I did nothing he taught me—I neither concealed myself nor blended in with others to avoid notice. At least no one would suspect me of knowing much about spycraft.

"So has Cardan forgiven *you*?" I ask her, pleased by her stricken look. "Too bad. I hear a prince's favor is a really big deal."

"What need have I for princes?" she demands. "My mother is a queen!"

There's much I could say about her mother, Queen Orlagh, who is planning a poisoning, but I bite my tongue. In fact, I bite it so hard that I don't say anything at all. I just walk to where Taryn is sitting, a small, satisfied smile on my face.

More weeks pass, until the coronation is mere days away. I am so tired that I fall asleep whenever I put my head down.

I even fall asleep in the tower during a demonstration of moth summoning. The susurration of their wings lulls me, I guess. It doesn't take much.

I wake on the stone floor. My head is ringing, and I am scrambling for my knife. I don't know where I am. For a moment, I think that I must have fallen. For a moment, I think I am paranoid. Then I see Valerian, grinning down at me. He has pushed me out of my chair. I know it just from the look on his face.

I have not yet become paranoid enough.

Voices sound from outside, the rest of our classmates having their luncheon on the grass as evening rolls in. I hear the shrieks of the youngest children, probably chasing one another over blankets.

"Where's Taryn?" I ask, because it wasn't like her not to wake me.

"She promised not to help you, remember?" Valerian's golden hair hangs over one eye. As usual, he's clad entirely in red, a tone so deep that it might appear black at first glance. "Not by word or by deed."

Of course. Stupid me to forget I was on my own.

I push myself up, noticing a bruise on my calf as I do. I am not sure how long I was sleeping. I brush off my tunic and trousers. "What do you want?"

"I'm disappointed," he says slyly. "You bragged about how you were going to best Cardan, and yet you've done nothing, sulking after one little prank."

My hand slides automatically to the hilt on my knife.

Valerian lifts my necklace of rowan berries from his pocket and smirks at me. He must have cut it from my throat while I slept. I shudder at the thought that he was so close to me, that instead of slicing the necklace, he could have sliced skin. "Now you will do what I say." I can practically smell the glamour in the air. He's weaving magic with his words. "Call down to Cardan. Tell him he's won. Then jump from the tower. After all, being born mortal is like being born already dead."

The violence of it, the awful finality of his command, is shocking. A few months ago, I would have done it. I would have said the words, I would have leapt. If I hadn't made that bargain with Dain, I would be dead.

Valerian may have been planning my murder since the day he choked me. I remember the light in his eyes then, the eagerness with which he watched me gasp. Taryn had warned me I was going to get myself killed, and I bragged that I was ready for it, but I am not.

"I think I'll take the stairs," I tell Valerian, hoping I don't seem half as shaken as I am. Then, acting as though everything is normal, I go to move past him.

For a moment, he just looks confused, but his confusion quickly morphs into rage. He blocks my escape, moving in front of the steps. "I commanded you. Why don't you obey me?"

Looking him dead in the eye, I force myself to smile. "You had the advantage of me twice, and twice you gave it away. Good luck getting it again."

He's sputtering, furious. "You're nothing. The human species pretends it is so resilient. Mortal lives are one long game of make-believe. If you couldn't lie to yourselves, you'd cut your own throats to end your misery."

I am struck by the word *species*, by the idea that he thinks I am something entirely else, like an ant or a dog or a deer. I am not sure he's wrong, but I don't like the thought. "I don't feel particularly miserable right at the moment." I can't show him I'm afraid.

His mouth curls. "What happiness do you have? Rutting and breeding. You'd go mad if you accepted the truth of what you are. You are nothing. You barely exist at all. Your only purpose is to create more of your kind before you die some pointless and agonizing death."

I look him in the eye. "And?"

He seems taken aback, although the sneer doesn't leave his face.

"Yeah, yeah, sure. I am going to die. And I am a big liar. So what?"

He pushes me against the wall, hard. "So *you lose*. Admit that you lost."

I try to shrug him off, but he grabs for my throat, fingers pressing hard enough to cut off my airflow. "I could kill you right now," he says. "And you would be forgotten. It would be as though you'd never been born."

There is no doubt in my mind that he means it, no doubt at all. Gasping, I pull the knife from my little pocket and stab him in the side. Right between his ribs. If my knife had been longer, I would have punctured his lung.

His eyes go wide with shock. His grip on me loosens. I know what Madoc would say—to push the blade higher. Go for an artery. Go for his

heart. But if I manage it, I will have murdered one of the favored sons of Faerie. I cannot even guess my punishment.

You're no killer.

I balk and pull the knife free, running out of the room. I shove the bloody blade into my pocket. My boots clatter on the stone as I head for the stairs.

Looking back, I see him on his knees, pressing a hand to his side to stanch the blood. He lets out a hiss of pain that makes me recall my knife is cold iron. Cold iron hurts faeries a lot.

I could not be gladder of carrying it.

I round the corner and nearly run down Taryn.

"Jude!" she exclaims. "What happened?"

"Come on," I tell her, dragging her toward the other students. There's blood on my knuckles, blood on my fingers, but not much. I rub it off on my tunic.

"What did he do to you?" Taryn cries as I hustle her along.

I tell myself that I don't mind that she left me. It wasn't her job to stick out her neck, especially when she made it abundantly clear she didn't want any part of this fight. Is there a treacherous part of me that's pissed off and sad that she didn't kick me awake and damn the consequences? Sure. But even I didn't guess how far Valerian would go or how fast he'd get there.

We're crossing the lawn when Cardan veers in our direction. He's wearing loose clothes and carrying a practice sword.

His eyes narrow at the blood, and he points the wooden stick at me. "You seem to have cut yourself." I wonder if he's surprised that I'm alive. I wonder if he watched the tower the whole time during his luncheon, waiting for the amusing spectacle of me jumping to my death.

I take the knife out from under my tunic and show it to him, stained a flinty red. I smile. "I could cut you, too."

"Jude!" Taryn says. She's clearly shocked by my behavior. She should be. My behavior is shocking.

"Oh, *go* already," Cardan tells her, waving her off with one hand. "Stop boring us both."

Taryn takes a step back. I'm surprised, too. Is this part of the game?

"Are your dirty blade and even dirtier habits supposed to mean something?" His words are airy, drawling. He is looking at me as though I'm being *uncouth* by pointing a weapon at him—even though he's the one

with the minion who assaulted me. Twice. He's looking at me as though we're going to share some kind of witty repartee, but I am not sure what to say.

Is he really not worried about what I might have done to Valerian?

Could he possibly not know Valerian attacked me?

Taryn spots Locke and takes off toward him, hurrying across the field. They converse for a moment, then Taryn departs. Cardan notices my noticing. He sniffs, as though the very smell of me offends him.

Locke starts toward us, all loose limbs and shining eyes. He gives me a wave. For a moment, I feel almost safe. I am immensely grateful to Taryn, for sending him over. I am immensely grateful to Locke, for coming.

"You think I don't deserve him," I say to Cardan.

He smiles slowly, like the moon slipping beneath the waves of the lake. "Oh no, I think you're perfect for each other."

A few moments later, Locke has an arm thrown around my shoulders. "Come on," he says. "Let's get out of here."

And so, without a backward glance at any of them, we do.

We walk through the Crooked Forest, where all the trees are bowed in the same direction as though they've been blown by a strong wind since they were saplings. I stop to pick a few blackberries from prickly stems of bushes growing between them. I have to blow tiny sugar ants from each before putting it in my mouth.

I offer a berry to Locke, but he demurs.

"So, in short, Valerian tried to kill me," I say, finishing my story. "And I stabbed him."

His fox eyes are steady on me. "You *stabbed* Valerian."

"So I might be in some trouble." I take a deep breath.

He shakes his head. "Valerian won't tell anyone he was bested by a mortal girl."

"What about Cardan? Won't he be disappointed his plan didn't work?" I gaze out at the sea, visible between the trunks of the trees. It seems to stretch on to forever.

“I doubt he even knew about it,” Locke says, and smiles at my surprise. “Oh, he’d like to make you believe he’s our leader, but it’s more that Nicasia likes power, I like dramatics, and Valerian likes violence. Cardan can provide us with all three, or at least excuses for all three.”

“Dramatics?” I echo.

“I like for things to happen, for stories to unfold. And if I can’t find a good enough story, I make one.” He looks every inch the trickster in that moment. “I know you overheard Nicasia talking about what was between us. She had Cardan, but only in leaving him for me did she gain power over him.”

I ponder that for a moment, and while I do, I realize we’re not taking our usual path to Madoc’s grounds. Locke has been leading me another way. “Where are we going?”

“My demesne,” he says with a grin, happy to be caught out. “It’s not far. I think you’ll like the hedge maze.”

I have never been to one of their estates, save for Hollow Hall. In the human world, we children were always in the neighbors’ yards, swinging and swimming and jumping, but the rules here are nothing the same. Most of the children in the High King’s Court are royals, sent from smaller Courts to gain influence with the princes and princesses, and have no time for much else.

Of course, in the mortal world, there are such things as backyards. Here, there are forest and sea, rocks and mazes, and flowers that are red only when they get fresh blood. I don’t much like the idea of getting lost deliberately in a hedge maze, but I smile as though nothing could ever delight me more. I don’t want to disappoint him.

“There will be a gathering later,” Locke continues. “You should stay. I promise it will be diverting.”

At that, my stomach clenches. I doubt he’s having a party without his friends. “That seems foolish,” I say, to avoid refusing the invitation outright.

“Your father doesn’t like you to stay out late?” Locke gives me a pitying look.

I know he’s just trying to make me feel childish when he knows perfectly well why I shouldn’t be there, but even though I am aware of what he’s doing, it works.

Locke’s estate is more modest than Madoc’s and less fortified. Tall spires covered in shingles of mossy bark rise between the trees. The spiraling vines of ivy and honeysuckle that twine up the sides turn the whole thing green and leafy.

“Wow,” I say. I have ridden by here and seen those spires in the distance, but I never knew to whose house they belonged. “Beautiful.”

He gives me a quick grin. “Let’s go inside.”

Although there is a pair of grand doors in the front, he takes me around to a small door on the side that leads directly to the kitchens. A fresh loaf of bread rests on the counter, along with apples, currants, and a soft cheese, but I do not see any servants who might have prepared this.

I think, involuntarily, of the girl in Hollow Hall cleaning Cardan’s fireplace. I wonder where her family thinks she is and what bargain she made. I wonder how easily I could have been her.

“Is your family home?” I ask, pushing that thought away.

“I have none,” he tells me. “My father was too wild for the Court. He liked the deep, feral woods far better than my mother’s intrigues. He left, and then she died. Now it’s just me.”

“That’s terrible,” I say. “And lonely.”

He shakes off my words. “I’ve heard the story of your parents. A tragedy suitable for a ballad.”

“It was a long time ago.” The last thing I want to talk about is Madoc and murder. “What happened to your mother?”

He makes a dismissive gesture in the air. “She got involved with the High King. In this Court, that’s enough. There was a child—*his* child, I suppose—and someone didn’t want it born. Blusher mushroom.” Although he began his speech airily, it doesn’t end that way.

Blusher mushroom. I think of the letter I found in Balekin’s house from Queen Orlagh. I try to convince myself that the note could not have referred to the poisoning of Locke’s mother, that Balekin had no motive when Dain was already the High King’s chosen heir. But no matter how I try to convince myself, I cannot stop thinking about the possibility, of the horror, of Nicasia’s mother having had a hand in Locke’s mother’s death. “I shouldn’t have asked—that was rude of me.”

“We are children of tragedy.” He shakes his head and then smiles. “This is not how I meant to begin. I meant to give you wine and fruit and cheese. I

meant to tell you how your hair is as beautiful as curling woodsmoke, your eyes the exact color of walnuts. I thought I could compose an ode about it, but I am not very good at odes."

I laugh, and he covers his heart as though stung by cruelty. "Before I show you the maze, let me show you something else."

"What's that?" I ask, curious.

He takes my hand. "Come," he says, prankish, leading me through the house. We come to spiraling stairs. Up we go, up and up and up.

I feel dizzy. There are no doors and no landings. Just stone and steps and my heart beating loud in my chest. Just his slanted smiles and amber eyes. I try not to stumble or slip as I climb. I try not to slow down, no matter how light-headed I feel.

I think of Valerian. *Jump from the tower.*

I keep climbing, taking shallow breaths.

You are nothing. You barely exist at all.

When we get to the top, there's a small door—half our height. I lean against the wall, waiting for my balance to return, and watch Locke turn the elaborate silver knob. He ducks as he goes in. I steel myself, push off the wall, and follow.

And gasp. We're on a balcony at the very top of the tallest tower, one higher than the tree line. From here, lit by starlight, I can see the maze below and the folly in the center. I can see the aboveground parts of the Palace of Elfhame and Madoc's estate and Balekin's Hollow Hall. I can see the sea that encircles the island and beyond it, the bright lights of human cities and towns through the ever-present mist. I have never looked directly from our world into theirs.

Locke puts his hand against my back, between my shoulder blades. "At night, the human world looks as though it's full of fallen stars."

I lean into his touch, pushing away the awfulness of the climb, trying not to stand too close to the edge. "Have you ever been there?"

He nods. "My mother took me when I was a child. She said our world would grow stagnant without yours."

I want to tell him that it's not mine, that I barely understand it, but I get what he's trying to say, and the correction would make it seem as though I didn't. His mother's sentiment is kind, certainly kinder than most views of the mortal world. She must have been kind herself.

He turns me toward him and then slowly brings his lips to mine. They're soft, and his breath is warm. I feel as distant from my body as the lights of the faraway city. My hand reaches for the railing. I grip it hard as his arm goes around my waist, to ground myself in what's happening, to convince myself that I am here and that this moment, high above everything, is real.

He draws back. "You really are beautiful," he says.

I am never so glad to know they cannot lie.

"This is incredible," I say, looking down. "Everything looks so small, like on a strategy board."

He laughs, as though I cannot possibly be serious. "I take it you spend a lot of time in your father's study?"

"Enough," I say. "Enough to know what my odds are against Cardan. Against Valerian and Nicasia. Against you."

He takes my hand. "Cardan is a fool. The rest of us don't matter." His smile turns slanted. "But maybe this is part of your plan—persuade me to take you to the very heart of my stronghold. Maybe you're about to reveal your evil scheme and bend me to your will. Just so you know, I don't think it will be very hard to bend me to your will."

I laugh despite myself. "You're nothing like them."

"Aren't I?" he asks.

I give him a long look. "I don't know. Are you going to order me off this balcony?"

His eyebrows go up. "Of course not."

"Well then, you're not like them," I say, poking him hard in the center of his chest. My hand flattens, almost unconsciously, letting the warmth of him seep up through my palm. I hadn't realized how cold I'd become, standing in the wind.

"You're not the way they said you would be," he says, bending toward me. He kisses me again.

I don't want to think about the things they must have said, not now. I want his mouth on mine, blotting out everything else.

It takes us a long time to wend our way back down the stairs. My hands are in his hair. His mouth is on my neck. My back is against the ancient stone wall. Everything is slow and perfect and makes no sense at all. This can't be my life. This feels nothing like my life.

We sit at the long, empty banquet table and eat cheese and bread. We drink pale green wine that tastes of herbs out of massive goblets that Locke finds in the back of a cabinet. They're so thick with dust he has to wash them twice before we can use them.

When we're done, he presses me back against the table, lifting me so that I am seated on it, so that our bodies are pressed together. It's exhilarating and terrifying, like so much of Faerie.

I am not sure I am very good at kissing. My mouth is clumsy. I am shy. I want to pull him closer and push him away at the same time. Faeries do not have a lot of taboos around modesty, but I do. I am afraid that my mortal body stinks of sweat, of decay, of fear. I am not sure where to put my hands, how hard to grab, how deep to sink my nails into his shoulders. And while I know what comes after kissing, while I know what it means to have his hands slide up over my bruised calf to my thigh, I have no idea how to hide my inexperience.

He pulls back to look at me, and I try to keep the panic out of my eyes.

"Stay tonight," he murmurs.

For a moment, I think he means with him, like *with him*, and my heart speeds with some combination of desire and dread. Then, abruptly, I remember there's going to be a party—that's what he's asking me to stay for. Those unseen servants, wherever they are, must be preparing the estate. Soon Valerian, my would-be murderer, might be dancing in the garden.

Well, maybe not *dancing*. He'll probably be leaning against a wall stiffly, with a drink in his hand, bandages around his ribs, and a new plan to murder me in his heart. If not new *orders* to murder me from Cardan.

"Your friends won't like it," I say, sliding off the table.

"They'll quickly be too drunk to notice. You can't spend your life locked up in Madoc's glorified barracks." He gives me a smile that is clearly meant to charm me. It kind of works. I think about Dain's offer to give me a love mark on my brow and wonder idly if Locke might have one, because, despite everything, I am tempted.

"I don't have the right clothes," I say, gesturing to the tunic I have on, stained with Valerian's blood.

He looks me up and down longer than an inspection of my garments requires. "I can find you a gown. I can find you anything you'd like. You asked me about Cardan, Valerian, and Nicasia—come see them outside of

school, come see them be foolish and drunk and debased. See their vulnerabilities, the cracks in their armor. You've got to know them to beat them, right? I don't say you'll like them any better, but you don't need to like them."

"I like *you*," I tell him. "I like playing pretend with you."

"Pretend?" he echoes, as though he's not sure if I'm insulting him.

"Of course," I say, going to the windows of the hall and looking out. Moonlight streams onto the leafy entrance to the maze. Torches are burning nearby, the flames flickering and wavering in the wind. "Of course we're pretending! We don't belong together, but it's fun anyway."

He gives me an evaluating, conspiratorial look. "Then let's keep doing it."

"Okay," I say helplessly. "I'll stay. I'll go to your party." I have had little fun in my life so far. The promise of more is difficult to resist.

He leads me through several rooms until we come to double doors. For a moment, he hesitates, glancing back at me. Then he pushes them open, and we're in an enormous bedroom. A thick, oppressive layer of dust blankets everything. There are footprints—two sets. He's come in here before, but not many times.

"The dresses in the closet were my mother's. Borrow whatever you like," he says, taking my hand.

Looking around this untouched room at the heart of the house, I understand the grief that made him lock it up for so long. I am glad to be let in. If I had a room full of my mother's things, I do not know if I would let anyone inside. I don't even know if I would brave it myself.

He opens one of the closets. Much of the clothing is moth-eaten, but I can see what they once were. A skirt with a beaded pattern of pomegranates, another that pulls up, like a curtain, to show a stage with jeweled mechanical puppets underneath. There is even one stitched with the silhouette of dancing fauns as tall as the skirt itself. I've admired Oriana's dresses for their elegance and opulence, but these awaken in me a hunger for a dress that's riotous. They make me wish I'd seen Locke's mother in one of her gowns. They make me think she must have liked to laugh.

"I don't think I've ever seen a dress like any of these," I tell him. "You really want me to wear one?"

He brushes a hand over a sleeve. "I guess they're a bit rotted."

“No,” I say. “I like them.”

The one with the fauns is the least damaged. I dust it off and tug it on behind an old screen. I struggle, because it’s the sort of dress that’s difficult to put on without Tatterfell’s help. I have no idea how to arrange my hair any differently, so I leave it as is—braided in a crown around my head. When I wipe off a silver mirror with my hand and see myself dressed in a dead faerie’s clothes, a shudder goes through me.

Suddenly, I do not know why I am here in this place. I am not sure of Locke’s intentions. When he tries to drape me in his mother’s jewels, I refuse them.

“Let’s go out to the garden,” I say. I no longer want to be in this empty, echoing room.

He puts away the long string of emeralds he was holding. As we leave, I look back at the closet of moldering clothes. Despite my feelings of unease, there’s a part of me that can’t help imagining what it would be like to be the mistress of this place. Imagining Prince Dain with the crown. Imagining entertaining at the long table we kissed against, my classmates all drinking the pale green wine and pretending they had never tried to murder me. Locke, with his hand in mine.

And me, spying on them all for the king.

The hedge maze is taller than the height of an ogre and formed of dense, glossy leaves in a deep green. Apparently, Cardan’s circle meets here often. I can hear them laughing at the center of the maze when I walk outside with Locke, late to his own gathering. The smell of pine liquor is alive in the air. The firelight of the torches makes long shadows and limns everything in scarlet. My steps slow.

Reaching into the pocket of the borrowed dress, I touch my knife, still stained with Valerian’s blood. When I do, my fingers light on something else, something Locke’s mother must have left years before. I pull out her bauble—a golden acorn. It doesn’t look like jewelry—there is no chain—and I cannot imagine what purpose it might have had other than to be pretty. I drop it back into my pocket.

Locke holds my hand as we move through the turns of the hedge maze. It does not seem as though there are many. I try to map it in my mind as I go, in case I have to find my way out alone. The simplicity of the maze makes me nervous rather than confident. I do not believe there are many simple things in Faerie. At home, dinner will be coming to a close without me. Taryn will be whispering to Vivi how I went somewhere with Locke. Madoc will be frowning and stabbing his meat, annoyed with me for missing his lessons.

I have braved worse things.

At the center of the maze, a piper is playing a lilting, wild song. White rose petals blow through the air. Folk are gathered, eating and drinking from a long banquet table that seems mostly piled with different distillations—cordials in which mandrake roots float, sour plum wine, a clear liquor infused with handfuls of red clover. And beside those, vials of golden nevermore.

Cardan is lying on a blanket, his head tipped back and his loose white shirt unbuttoned. Although it is still early in the night, he appears to be very drunk. His mouth is flaked with gold. A horned girl I don't know is kissing his throat, and another, this one with daffodil hair, presses her mouth against the calf of his leg, just above the top of his boot.

To my relief, I do not see Valerian. I hope he's home, nursing that wound I gave him.

Locke brings me a thimbleful of liquor, and I take a tiny scalding sip for the sake of politeness. I start coughing immediately. At that moment, Cardan's gaze goes to me. His eyes are barely open, but I can see the shine of them, wet as tar. He watches me as the girl kisses his mouth, watches me as she slides her hand beneath the hem of his silly, ruffly shirt.

My cheeks heat. I look away and then am angry with myself for giving him the satisfaction of seeming uncomfortable. He's the one who's making a spectacle of himself.

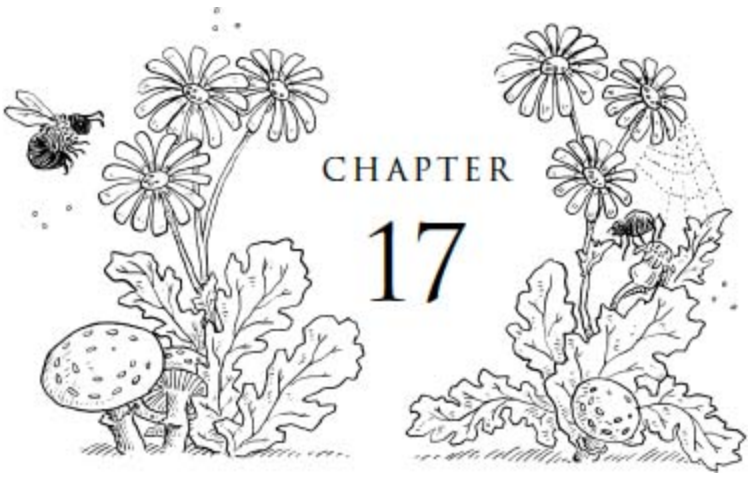
"I see a member of the *Circle of Worms* has chosen to grace us with her presence tonight," Nicasia says, swanning up to us in a dress with all the colors of the sunset in it. She peers into my face. "But which one is it?"

"The one you don't like," I tell her, ignoring her jibe.

That makes her give a high, false laugh. "Oh, you might be surprised how some of us feel about both of you."

“I promised you better amusements than this,” Locke says stiffly, taking my elbow. I am grateful when he pulls me toward a low table with pillows strewn haphazardly around it, but I can’t help giving Nicasia a small, antagonizing wave as I go. I pour out my thimble of liquor onto the grass when Locke isn’t looking. The piper finishes, and a naked boy, shining with gold paint, takes out a lyre and sings a filthy song about broken hearts: “*O lady fair! O lady cruel! How I miss your sweet misrule. I miss your hair. I miss your eyes. But most of all, I miss your thighs.*”

Locke kisses me again, in front of the fire. Everyone can see it, but I don’t know if they’re looking, because I close my eyes as tightly as they will go.



I wake in Locke’s house on a bed covered in tapestries. My mouth tastes of sour plums and is swollen from kissing. Locke is beside me on the bed, eyes shut, still in his party clothes. I pause in the act of rising to study him, his sharp ears and fox-fur hair, the softness of his mouth, his long limbs spread out in sleep. His head is pillowed on one ruffle-covered wrist.

The night comes back in a rush of memory. There was dancing and a chase through the maze. I remember falling on my hands in the dirt and laughing, totally unlike myself. Indeed, when I look down at the borrowed ball gown I slept in, there are grass stains on it.

Not that I’ d be the first to green gown her.

Prince Cardan watched me all night, a shark restlessly circling, waiting for the right moment to bite. Even now I can conjure the memory of the scorched black of his eyes. And if I laughed louder for the sake of angering him, if I smiled wider, and kissed Locke longer, that is a kind of deceit that even the Folk cannot condemn.

Now, however, the night feels like one long, impossible dream.

Locke’s bedroom is messy—books and clothes scattered on divans and low couches. I wade through to the door and pad over the empty halls of the house. Finding my way back to the dusty room of his mother’s, I take off

her gown and tug on yesterday's clothes. I reach to take my knife from her pocket, and when I do, the golden acorn comes out with it.

Impulsively, I tuck both knife and acorn into my tunic. I want some memento of the night, something to recall it, should nothing like it ever happen again. Locke told me I could borrow anything in the room, and I am borrowing this.

On my way out, I pass the long dining table. Nicasia is there, sectioning an apple with a little knife.

"Your hair looks like a thicket," she says, popping a slice of fruit into her mouth.

I glance at a silver plate on the wall, which shows only a distorted and blurred image of myself. Even in that, I can tell she's right—a halo of brown surrounds my head. Reaching up, I begin undoing my braid, combing it out with my fingers.

"Locke's asleep," I say, assuming that she's waiting to see him. I expect to feel as though I have something over her, being the one that came from his bedroom, but what I actually feel is a little bit of panic.

I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to wake up in a boy's house and talk to the girl with whom he had a relationship. That she's also a girl who probably wants me dead is, oddly, the only part of this that feels at all normal.

"My mother and his brother thought we were to be wed," she says, seeming as though she might be talking to the air and not to me at all. "It was going to be a useful alliance."

"With Locke?" I ask, confused.

She gives me an annoyed look, my question seeming to bring her briefly out of her story. "Cardan and me. He ruins things. That's what he likes. To ruin things."

Of course Cardan likes to ruin things. I wonder how that could be something she only just realized. I would have thought that would be something they had in common.

I leave her to her apple and her reminiscences and head toward the palace. A cool breeze blows through the trees, lifting my loose hair and bringing me the scent of pine. In the sky, I hear the call of gulls. I am grateful for the lecture today, glad to have an excuse for not going home and hearing whatever Oriana has to say to me.

Today the lecture is in the tower, my least favorite location. I climb the steps and settle myself. I am late, but I find a spot on a bench near the back. Taryn is sitting on the other side. She looks at me once, raising her brows. Cardan is beside her, dressed in green velvet, with golden stitching picking out thorns tipped in blue thread. He lounges in his seat, long fingers tapping restlessly against the wood of the bench beside him.

Looking at him makes me feel equally restless.

At least Valerian hasn't shown up. It is too much to hope that he never returns, but at least I have today.

A new instructor, a knight named Dulcamara, is talking about rules of inheritance, probably in anticipation of the coming coronation.

The coronation, which will mark my rise to power as well. Once Prince Dain is the High King, his spies can haunt the shadows of Elfhame with only Dain himself to keep us in check.

"In some of the lower Courts, a king or queen's murderer can take the throne," Dulcamara says. She goes on to tell us that she is part of the Court of Termites, which has not yet joined Eldred's banner.

Although she is not wearing armor, she stands as though she's used to the weight of it. "And that is why Queen Mab bargained with the wild fey to make the crown King Eldred wears, which can only be passed down to her descendants. It would be tricky to get it by force." She grins wickedly.

If Cardan were to try to stop her lesson, she looks like she would eat him alive and crack his bones for marrow.

The Gentry children look at Dulcamara uncomfortably. Rumor has it that Lord Roiben, her king, is planning to swear to the new High King, bringing with him his large Court, one that has held off Madoc's forces for years. Roiben's joining the High Court of Elfhame is widely considered to be a masterstroke of diplomacy, negotiated by Prince Dain against Madoc's wishes. I suppose she's come for the coronation.

Larkspur, one of the youngest of us, pipes up. "What happens when there are no more children in the Greenbriar line?"

Dulcamara's smile gentles. "Once there are fewer than two descendants —one to wear the crown and the other to place it on the ruler's head—the High Crown and its power crumble. All of Elfhame will be free from their oaths to it.

“Then, who knows? Maybe a new ruler will make a new crown. Maybe you’ll return to warring with smaller Seelie and Unseelie Courts. Maybe you will join our banners in the Southwest.” Her smile makes it clear which of those she would prefer.

I stick my hand up. Dulcamara nods in my direction. “What if someone *tries* to take the crown?”

Cardan gives me a look. I want to glare, but I can’t help thinking of him sprawled out on the ground with those girls. My cheeks heat all over again. I drop my gaze.

“An interesting question,” Dulcamara says. “Legend has it that the crown will not allow itself to be placed on the brow of anyone who isn’t an heir of Mab, but Mab’s line has been very fruitful. So long as a pair of descendants try to take the crown, it could be done. But the most dangerous part of a coup would be this: The crown is cursed so that a murder of its wearer causes the death of the person responsible.”

I think of the note I found in Balekin’s house, about blusher mushrooms, about vulnerability.

After the lecture, I go down the steps carefully, remembering taking them at a run after stabbing Valerian. My vision blurs, and I feel dizzy for a moment, but the moment passes. Taryn, coming behind me, all but pushes me into the woods once we’re outside.

“First of all,” she says, tugging me over patches of curling ferns, “no one knows you weren’t home all last night except for Tatterfell, and I gave her one of your nicest rings to make sure she wouldn’t say anything. But you have to tell me where you were.”

“Locke had a party at his house,” I say. “I stayed—but it wasn’t, I mean, nothing much happened. We kissed. That was it.”

Her chestnut braids fly as she shakes her head. “I don’t know if I believe that.”

I let out my breath, perhaps a little dramatically. “Why would I lie? I’m not the one hiding the identity of the person courting me.”

Taryn frowns. “I just think that sleeping in someone’s room, in someone’s bed, is more than kissing.”

My cheeks heat, thinking of the way it had felt to wake up with his body stretched out beside mine. To get the attention off me, I start speculating about her. “Ooooh, maybe it’s Prince Balekin. Are you going to marry

Prince Balekin? Or perhaps it's Noggle and you can count the stars together."

She smacks me in the arm, a little too hard. "Stop guessing," she says. "You know I'm not allowed to say."

"Ow." I pick a white campion flower and stick it behind my ear.

"So you like him?" she asks. "Really like him?"

"Locke?" I ask. "Of course I do."

She gives me a look, and I wonder how much I worried her, not coming home the night before.

"Balekin I like less well," I say, and she rolls her eyes.

When we get back to the stronghold, I find that Madoc has left word he will be out until late. With little else to do for once, I look for Taryn, but although I saw her go upstairs just minutes before, she's not in her room. Instead, her dress is on the bed and her closet open, a few gowns hanging roughly, as though she pulled them out before finding them wanting.

Has she gone to meet her suitor? I take a turn around the room, trying to see it as a spy might, alert for signs of secrets. I notice nothing unusual but a few rose petals withering on her dressing table.

I go to my room and lie on my bed, going over my memories of the night before. Reaching into my pocket, I remove my knife to finally clean it. When I bring it out, I am holding the golden acorn, too. I turn the bauble over in my hand.

It's a solid lump of metal—a beautiful object. At first I take it only for that, before I notice the tiny lines running across it, tiny lines that seem to indicate moving parts. As though it were a puzzle.

I can't screw off the top, although I try. I can't seem to do anything else with it, either. I am about to give up and toss it onto my dressing table when I glimpse a tiny hole, so small as to be nearly invisible, right at the bottom. Hopping off my bed, I rattle through my desk, looking for a pin. The one I find has a pearl on one end. I try to fit the point into the acorn. It takes a moment, but I manage, pushing past resistance until I feel a click and it opens.

Mechanized steps swing out from a shining center, where a tiny golden bird rests. Its beak moves, and it speaks in a creaky little voice. *"My dearest friend, these are the last words of Liriope. I have three golden birds to scatter. Three attempts to get one into your hand. I am too far gone for any*

antidote, and so if you hear this, I leave you with the burden of my secrets and the last wish of my heart. Protect him. Take him far from the dangers of this Court. Keep him safe, and never, ever tell him the truth of what happened to me."

Tatterfell comes into the room, bringing with her a tray with tea things. She tries to peek at what I am doing, but I cup my hand over the acorn.

When she goes out, I set down the bauble and pour myself a cup of tea, holding it to warm my hands. Liriope is Locke's mother. This seems like a message asking someone—her dearest friend—to spirit him—Locke—away. She calls the message her "last words," so she must have known she was about to die. Perhaps the acorns were to be sent to Locke's father, in the hopes Locke might spend the rest of his life exploring wild places with him rather than be caught up in intrigues.

But since Locke is still here, it seems as if none of the three acorns were found. Maybe none of them even left her bower.

I should give it to him, let him decide for himself what to do with it. But all I keep thinking about is the note on Balekin's desk, the note that seemed to implicate Balekin in Liriope's murder. Should I tell Locke everything?

> *I know the provenance of the blusher mushroom that you ask after, but what you do with it must not be tied to me.*

I turn the words over in my mind the way I turned the acorn in my hand, and I feel the same seams.

There's something odd about that sentence.

I copy it out again on a piece of paper to be sure I remember it correctly. When I first read it, the note seemed to imply that Queen Orlagh had located a deadly poison for Balekin. But blusher mushrooms—while rare—grow wild, even on this island. I picked blusher mushrooms in the Milkwood, beside the black-thorned bees, who build their hives high in the trees (an antidote can be made with their honey, I learned recently from all my reading). Blusher mushrooms aren't dangerous if you don't drink the red liquid.

What if Queen Orlagh's note didn't mean that she'd *found* blusher mushrooms and she was going to give them to Balekin? What if by "know the provenance," Orlagh literally just meant that she *knew* where *particular* blusher mushrooms had come from? After all, she says "what you do with

it” and not “what you do with *them*.” She’s cautioning him about what he’s going to do with the knowledge, not the actual mushrooms.

Which means he’s not going to poison Dain.

It also means that Balekin may have uncovered who’d caused Locke’s mother’s death, if he found out who had the blusher mushrooms that killed her. The answer could have been there, among the other papers that I, in my eagerness, had overlooked.

I have to go back. I have to get back into the tower. Today, before the coronation is any closer. Because maybe Balekin isn’t going to try to kill Dain at all and the Court of Shadows has the wrong idea. Or, if they have the right idea, he isn’t going to do it with blusher mushrooms.

Gulping down my tea, I find the servant garb in the back of my closet. I take down my hair and arrange it in an approximation of the rough braid that the girls in Balekin’s house wore. I tuck my knife high on my thigh and shake out some of my silver box of salt into my pocket. Then I grab for my cloak, toe on my leather shoes, and am out the door, palms starting to sweat.

I have learned a lot more since my first foray into Hollow Hall, enough to make me understand better the risks I was taking. That does nothing for my nerves. Given what I saw of him with Cardan, I am not at all confident I could endure what Balekin would do to me if he caught me.

Taking a deep breath, I remind myself not to get caught.

That’s what the Roach says a spy’s real job is. The information is secondary. The job is not to get caught.

In the hall, I pass Oriana. She looks me up and down. I have to resist the urge to pull the cloak more tightly around myself. She is wearing a gown the color of unripe mulberries, and her hair is pulled slightly back. The very tips of her pointed ears are covered in shimmering crystal cuffs. I am a little envious of them. If I wore them, they’d disguise the human roundness of my own ears.

“You came home very late last night,” she says, annoyance pulling at her mouth. “You missed dinner, and your father was expecting you to spar with him.”

“I’ll do better,” I say, then instantly regret the declaration because I am probably not going to be back for dinner tonight, either. “Tomorrow. I’ll start doing better tomorrow.”

“Faithless creature,” Oriana says, looking at me as though through the sheer intensity of her gaze she might ferret out my secrets. “You’re scheming.”

I am so tired of her suspicion, so very tired.

“You always think that,” I say. “It’s just that for once you’re right.” Leaving her to worry what that might mean, I go down the stairs and out onto the grass. This time, there’s no one in my way, no one to make me reconsider what I am about to do.

I don’t bring the toad this time; I am more careful. As I walk through the woods, I see an owl circling overhead. I pull the hood of my cape to cover my face.

At Hollow Hall, I stow my cloak outside between the logs of a woodpile and enter through the kitchens, where supper is being prepared. Squabs are lacquered with rose jelly, the smell of their crackling skin enough to make my mouth water and my stomach clench.

I open a cabinet and am greeted by a dozen candles, all of them the color of buffed leather and accented with a gold stamp of Balekin’s personal crest—three laughing black birds. I take out nine candles and, trying to move as mechanically as possible, carry them past the guards. One guard gives me an odd look. I am sure there is something off about me, but he’s seen my face before, and I am more sure-footed than last time.

At least until I see Balekin coming down the stairs.

He glances in my direction, and it is all I can do to keep my head down, my step even. I carry the candles into the room in front of me, which turns out to be the library.

To my immense relief, he doesn’t seem to truly see me. My heart is speeding, though, my breaths coming too fast.

The servant girl who was cleaning the grate in Cardan’s room is blurrily putting books back onto the shelves. She is as I remember her—cracked lips, thin, and bruise-eyed. Her movements are slow, as if the air were as thick as water. In her drugged dream, I am no more interesting than the furniture and of less consequence.

I scan the shelves impatiently, but I can see nothing useful. I need to get up to the tower, to go through all of Prince Balekin’s correspondence and hope I find something to do with Locke’s mother or Dain or the coronation, something I overlooked.

But I can’t do anything with Balekin between me and the stairs.

I look at the girl again. I wonder what her life is like here, what she dreams of. If she ever, for a moment, had a chance to get away. At least, thanks to the geas, if Balekin did catch me, this could not be my fate.

I wait, counting to a thousand, while piling my candles on a chair. Then I look out. Thankfully, Balekin is gone. Quickly, I head up the stairs toward the tower. I hold my breath as I pass Cardan’s door, but luck is with me. It is shut tight.

Then I am up the stairs and into Balekin’s study. I note the herbs in the jars around the room, herbs I see with new eyes. A few are poisonous, but most are just narcotic. Nowhere do I see blusher mushrooms. I go to his desk and wipe my hands against the rough cloth of my dress, trying to leave no trace of sweat, trying to memorize the pattern of papers.

There are two letters from Madoc, but they just seem to be about which knights will be at the coronation and in what pattern around the central dais. There are others that seem to be about assignations, about revels and parties and debauches. Nothing about blusher mushrooms, nothing about poisons at all. Nothing about Liriope or murder. The only thing that seems even a little surprising is a bit of doggerel, a love poem in Prince Dain’s hand, about a woman who remains unidentified, except by her “sunrise hair” and “starlit eyes.”

Worse, nothing I can find tells me anything about a plan to move against Prince Dain. If Balekin is going to murder his brother, he’s smart enough not to leave evidence lying around. Even the letter about the blusher mushroom is gone.

I have risked coming to Hollow Hall for nothing.

For a moment, I just stand there, trying to corral my thoughts. I need to leave without drawing attention to myself.

A messenger. I will disguise myself as a messenger. Messages run in and out of estates all the time. I take a blank sheet of paper and scrawl *Madoc* on one side, then seal the other with wax. The sulfur of the match hangs in the air for a moment. As it dissipates, I descend the steps, faked message in hand.

When I pass the library, I hesitate. The girl is still inside, mechanically lifting books from a pile and placing them on shelves. She will keep doing

that until she's told to do something else, until she collapses, until she fades away, unremembered. As if she were nothing.

I cannot leave her here.

I don't have anything to go back to in the mortal world, but she might. And yes, it's a betrayal of Prince Dain's faith in me, a betrayal of Faerie itself. I know that. But all the same, I can't leave her.

There is a kind of relief in realizing it.

I walk into the library, setting down the note on a table. She does not turn, does not react at all. I reach into my pocket and cup a little salt in the center of my palm. I hold it out to her, the way I would if I were coaxing a horse with sugar.

"Eat this," I tell her in a low voice.

She turns toward me, although her gaze doesn't focus. "I'm not allowed," she says, voice rough with disuse. "No salt. You're not supposed to—"

I clap my hand over her mouth, some of the salt tipping out onto the ground, the rest pressed against her lips.

I am an idiot. An impulsive idiot.

Locking my arm around her, I drag her deeper into the library. She's alternating between trying to shout and trying to bite me. She keeps scratching at my arms, her nails digging into my skin. I hold her there, against the wall, until she sags, until the fight goes out of her.

"I'm sorry," I whisper as I hold on. "I'm winging it. I don't want to hurt you. I want to save you. Please, let me do this. Let me save you."

Finally, she has been still long enough that I take a chance and pull my hand away. She's panting, breaths coming fast. She doesn't scream, though, which seems like a good sign.

"We're getting out of here," I tell her. "You can trust me."

She gives me a look of blank incomprehension.

"Just act like everything's normal." I pull her to her feet and realize the impossibility of what I'm asking. Her eyes are rolling in her head like a mad pony. I don't know how long we have until she completely loses it.

Still, there is nothing for me to do but march her out of Hollow Hall as fast as I can. I stick my head into the main chamber. It's still empty, so I drag her from the library. She's looking around as though she's seeing the heavy wooden staircase and the gallery above for the first time. Then I remember I left my fake note on the table in the library.

“Hold on,” I say. “I have to go back and—”

She makes a plaintive sound and pulls against my grip. I drag her along with me anyway and grab the message. I crumple it up and stuff it into my pocket. It’s useless now, when the guards could recall it and connect a servant girl’s disappearance to the household of the person who stole her. “What’s your name?”

The girl shakes her head.

“You must remember it,” I insist. It’s terrible that instead of being sympathetic, I am annoyed. *Buck up*, I think. *Stop feeling your feelings. Let’s go.*

“Sophie,” she says in a kind of sob. Tears are starting in her eyes. I feel worse and worse still for how cruel I am about to be.

“You’re not allowed to cry,” I tell her as harshly as I can, hoping my tone will scare her into listening. I try my best to sound like Madoc, to sound as if I am used to having my commands obeyed. “You *must not cry*. I will slap you if I have to.”

She cringes but subsides into silence. I wipe her eyes with the back of my hand. “Okay?” I ask her.

When she doesn’t answer, I figure there’s no more point in conversation. I steer her toward the kitchens. We’ll have to pass by guards; there’s no other way out. She has pasted on a horrible rictus of a smile, but at least she has enough self-possession for that. More worrying is the way she can’t stop staring at things. As we walk toward the guards, the intensity of her gaze is impossible to disguise.

I improvise, trying to sound as though I am reciting a memorized message, without inflection in the words. “Prince Cardan says we are to attend him.”

One of the guards turns to the other. “Balekin won’t like that.”

I try not to react, but it’s hard. I just stand there and wait. If they lunge at us, I am going to have to kill them.

“Very well,” the first guard says. “Go. But inform Cardan that his brother demands he bring both of you back this time.”

I don’t like the sound of that.

The second guard glances over at Sophie and her wild eyes. “What do you see?”

I can feel her trembling beside me, her whole body shaking. I need to say something fast, before she does. “Lord Cardan told us to be more observant,” I say, hoping that the plausible confusion of an ambiguous command will help to explain the way she’s acting.

Then I walk on with Sophie through the kitchens, past the human servants I am not saving, aware of the futility of my actions. Does helping one person really matter, on balance?

Once I have power, I will find a way to help them all, I tell myself. And once Dain is in power, I will have power.

I make sure to keep my movements slow. I let myself breathe only when we’ve finally stepped outside.

And it turns out, even that’s too soon. Cardan is riding toward us on a tall, dappled gray horse. Behind him is a girl on a palfrey—Nicasia. As soon as he gets inside, the guards will ask him about us. As soon as he gets inside, he will know something is wrong.

If he doesn’t see me and know sooner than that.

What would be the punishment for stealing a prince’s servant? I don’t know. A curse perhaps, such as being turned into a raven and forced to fly north and live for seven times seven years in an ice palace—or worse, no curse at all. An execution.

It takes everything I’ve got not to break and run. It’s not as though I think I could make it to the woods, especially not hauling a girl with me. He would ride us both down. “Stop staring,” I hiss at Sophie, harsher than I mean to. “Look at your feet.”

“Stop scolding me,” she says, but at least she’s not crying. I keep my head down and, looping her arm through mine, walk toward the woods.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cardan swing down from his saddle, black hair blown by the wind. He looks in my direction and pauses for a moment. I suck in my breath and don’t run.

I can’t run.

There is no thundering of hoofbeats, no racing to catch and punish us. To my immense relief, he seems to see only two servants heading toward the forest, perhaps to gather wood or berries or something.

The closer we get to the edge of the woods, the more each step feels fraught.

Then Sophie sinks to her knees, turning to look back at Balekin's manor. A keening sound comes from deep in her throat. "No," she says, shaking her head. "No no no no no. No. This isn't real. This didn't happen."

I jerk her up, digging my fingers into her armpit. "Move," I say. "Move or I will leave you here. Do you understand me? I will leave you, and Prince Cardan will find you and drag you back inside."

Cheating a glance back, I see him. He's off his horse and leading it to the stables. Nicasia still sits atop hers, her head tipped back, laughing at something he said. He's smiling, too, but it's not his usual sneer. He doesn't look like the wicked villain from a story. He looks like an inhuman boy out for a walk with his friend in the moonlight.

Sophie staggers onward. We can't get caught now, not when we're so close.

The moment when I cross into the pine-needle-strewn woods, I let out an enormous breath. I keep her moving until we reach the stream. I make her walk through it, though the cold water and sucking mud slows us down. Any way of hiding our tracks is worth doing.

Eventually, she sinks down on the bank and gives over to weeping. I watch her, wishing I knew what to do. Wishing I was a better, more sympathetic person, instead of being annoyed and worried that any delay is going to get us caught. I make myself sit on the remains of a termite-eaten log on the bank of the stream and let her cry, but when minutes have passed and her tears haven't stopped, I go over and kneel in the muddy grass.

"It's not far to my house," I say, trying to sound persuasive. "Just a little more walking."

"Shut up!" she shouts, lifting her hand to ward me off.

Frustration flares. I want to scream at her. I want to shake her. I bite my tongue and fist my hands to make myself stop.

"Okay," I say, taking a deep breath. "This is happening fast, I know. But I really do want to help you. I can get you out of Faerie. Tonight."

The girl is shaking her head again. "I don't know," she says. "I don't know. I was at Burning Man, and there was this guy who said he had this gig passing hors d'oeuvres for a rich weirdo in one of the air-conditioned tents. *Just don't take anything*, he told me. *If you do, you'll have to serve me for a thousand years. …*"

Her voice trails off, but now I see how she was trapped. It must have sounded like he was making a joke. She must have laughed, and he must have smiled. And then, whether she ate a single shrimp puff or pocketed some of the silverware—it would all be the same.

"It's okay," I say nonsensically. "It's going to be okay."

She looks at me and seems to see me for the first time, takes in that I am dressed like her, like a servant, but that there's something off about me. "Who are you? What is this place? What happened to us?"

I asked for her name, so I guess I should give her mine. "I'm Jude. I grew up here. One of my sisters, she can take you over the sea to the human town near here. From there, you can call someone to get you or you can go to the police and they'll find your people. This is almost over."

Sophie takes this in. "Is this some kind of—what happened? I remember things, impossible things. And I wanted. No, I couldn't have wanted …"

Her voice trails off, and I don't know what to say. I cannot guess the end of her sentence.

"Please, just tell me this isn't real. I don't think I can live with any of this being real." She's looking around the forest, as though if she can prove it isn't magic, then nothing else is, either. Which is stupid. All forests are magic.

"Come on," I say, because while I don't like the way she's talking, there's no point in lying for the sake of making her feel better. She's going to have to accept that she's been trapped in Faerie. It's not as if I have a boat to take her across the water; all I have are Vivi's ragwort steeds. "Can you walk a little farther now?" The faster she's back in the human world, the better.

As I get closer to Madoc's, I remember my cloak, still bunched up and hidden in a woodpile outside Hollow Hall, and curse myself all over again. Leading Sophie to the stables, I seat her in an empty stall. She slumps on the hay. I think the glimpse of the giant toad undid the last of her trust in me.

"Here we are," I say with forced cheerfulness. "I'm going inside to get my sister, and I want you to wait right here. Promise me."

She gives me a terrible look. "I can't do this. I can't face this."

"You have to." My voice comes out harsher than I intended. I stalk into the house and go up the steps as quickly as I can, hoping against hope that I

don’t run into anyone else on the way. I fling open the door to Vivienne’s room without bothering to knock.

Vivi, thankfully, is lying on her bed, writing a letter in green ink with drawings of hearts and stars and faces in the margins. She looks up when I come in, tossing back her hair. “That’s an interesting outfit you’ve got on.”

“I did something really stupid,” I say, out of breath.

That makes her push herself up, sliding off the bed and onto her feet. “What happened?”

“I stole a human girl—a human servant—from Prince Balekin, and I need you to help me get her back to the mortal world before anyone finds out.” As I say this, I realize all over again how ridiculous it was for me to do that—how risky, how foolish. He will just find another human willing to make a bad bargain.

But Vivi doesn’t chide me. “Okay, let me put on my shoes. I thought you were going to tell me you’d killed someone.”

“Why would you think that?” I ask.

She snorts as she searches around for boots. Her eyes meet mine as she does up the laces. “Jude, you keep smiling a pleasant smile in front of Madoc, but all I can see anymore is bared teeth.”

I am not sure what to say to that.

She puts on a long, fur-trimmed green coat with frog clasps. “Where is the girl?”

“In the stables,” I say. “I’ll take you—”

Vivi shakes her head. “Absolutely not. You have to get out of those clothes. Put on a dress and go down to dinner and make sure you act like everything’s normal. If someone comes to question you, tell them you’ve been in your room this whole time.”

“No one saw me!” I say.

Vivi gives me her best fish-eyed look. “No one? You’re sure.”

I think of Cardan, riding up as we made our escape, and of the guards, whom I’d lied to. “Probably no one,” I amend. “No one who noticed anything.” If Cardan had, he would never have let me get away. He would never have given up having that much power over me.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” she says, holding up a forbidding, long-fingered hand. “Jude, it isn’t safe.”

“I’m going,” I insist. “The girl’s name is Sophie, and she’s really freaked out—”

Vivi snorts. “I bet.”

“I don’t think she’ll go with you. You look like one of them.” Maybe I am more afraid of my nerve running out than anything else. I worry about the adrenaline ebbing out of my body, leaving me to face the mad thing I have done. But given Sophie’s suspicion of me, I absolutely think that Vivi’s cat eyes would be enough to send her over the edge. “Because you *are* one of them.”

“Are you telling me in case I forgot?” Vivi asks.

“We’ve got to go,” I say. “And I am coming. We don’t have time to debate this.”

“Come, then,” she says. Together, we go down the stairs, but as we are about to go out the door, she grabs my shoulder. “You can’t save our mother, you know. She’s already dead.”

I feel as though she has slapped me.

“That’s not—”

“Isn’t it?” she demands. “Isn’t that what you’re doing? Tell me this girl isn’t some stand-in for Mom. Some surrogate.”

“I want to help Sophie,” I say, shrugging off her grip. “Just Sophie.”

Outside, the moon is high in the sky, turning the leaves silver. Vivi goes out to pick a bouquet of ragwort stalks. “Fine, then go get this Sophie.”

She is where I left her, hunched in the hay, rocking back and forth and talking softly to herself. I am relieved to see her, relieved she didn’t run off and we weren’t even now tracking her through the forest, relieved that someone from Balekin’s household hadn’t ferreted out her location and hauled her away.

“Okay,” I say with forced cheerfulness. “We’re ready.”

“Yes,” she says, standing up. Her face is tearstained, but she’s no longer crying. She looks like she’s in shock.

“It’s going to be okay,” I tell her again, but she doesn’t answer. She follows me mutely out behind the stables, where Vivi is waiting, along with two rawboned ponies with green eyes and lacy manes.

Sophie looks at them and then at Vivi. She begins to back away, shaking her head. When I come near her, she backs away from me, too.

“No, no, no,” she says. “Please, no. No more. No.”

“It’s only a very little bit of magic,” Vivi says reasonably, but it’s still coming from someone with lightly furred points on her ears and eyes that flash gold in the dark. “Just a smidgen, and then you won’t ever have to see another magical thing. You’ll be back in the mortal world, the daylight world, the normal world. But this is the only way to get you there. We’re going to fly.”

“No,” Sophie says, her voice coming out broken.

“Let’s walk to the cliffside near here,” I say. “You’ll be able to see the lights—maybe even a few boats. You’ll feel better when you can see a destination.”

“We don’t have a lot of time,” Vivi reminds me with a significant look.

“It’s not far,” I argue. I don’t know what else to do. The only other choices I can think of are knocking her unconscious or asking Vivi to glamour her; both are terrible.

And so we walk through the woods, ragwort steeds following. Sophie doesn’t balk. The walk seems to calm her. She picks up rocks as we go, smooth stones that she dusts the dirt from and then puts in her pockets.

“Do you remember your life from before?” I ask her.

She nods and doesn’t speak for a little while, but then she turns back to me. She gives a weird croaking laugh. “I always wanted there to be magic,” she says. “Isn’t that funny? I wanted there to be an Easter Bunny and a Santa Claus. And Tinker Bell, I remember Tinker Bell. But I don’t want it. I don’t want it anymore.”

“I know,” I say. And I do. I have wished for many things over the years, but the first wish of my heart was that none of this was real.

At the water’s edge, Vivi mounts one of the steeds and puts Sophie up before her. I swing up onto the back of the other. Sophie gives the forest a trembling look and then glances over at me. She doesn’t seem afraid. She seems as though maybe she’s starting to believe that the worst is behind her.

“Hold on tight,” Vivi says, and her steed kicks up off the cliff and into the air. Mine follows. The wild exhilaration of flying hits me, and I grin with familiar delight. Beneath us are the whitecapped waves and ahead the shimmering lights of mortal towns, like a mysterious land strewn with stars. I glance over at Sophie, hoping to give her a reassuring smile.

Sophie isn’t looking at me, though. Her eyes are closed. And then, as I am watching, she tilts to one side, lets go of the steed’s mane, and lets

herself fall. Vivi grabs for her, but it’s too late. She is plunging soundlessly through the night sky, toward the mirrored darkness of the sea.

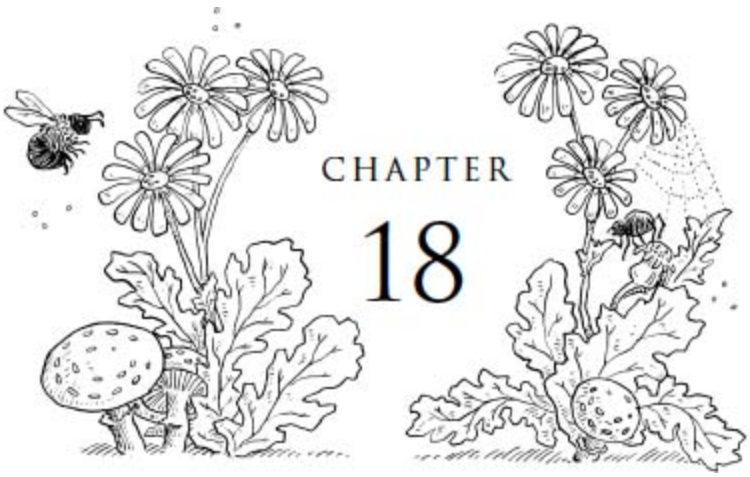
When she hits, there is barely even a splash.

I cannot speak. Everything seems to slow around me. I think of Sophie’s cracked lips, think of her saying, *Please, just tell me this isn’t real. I don’t think I can live with any of this being real*.

I think of the stones she filled her pockets with.

I hadn’t been listening. I hadn’t wanted to hear her; I’d just wanted to save her.

And now, because of me, she is dead.



I wake up groggy. I cried myself to sleep, and now my eyes are swollen and red, my head pounding. The whole previous night feels like a feverish, terrible nightmare. It doesn't seem possible that I snuck into Balekin's house and stole one of his servants. It seems even less possible that she preferred to drown than to live with the memories of Faerie. As I drink fennel tea and shrug on a doublet, Gnarbone comes to my door.

"Your pardon," he says with a short bow. "Jude must come immediately __"

Tatterfell waves him off. "She's not fit to see anyone right at the moment. I'll send her down when she's dressed."

"Prince Dain awaits her downstairs in General Madoc's parlor. He commanded me to fetch her and not to mind whatever state of dishabille she was in. He said to carry her if I had to." Gnarbone seems repentant at having to say that, but it's clear that none of us can refuse the Crown Prince.

Cold dread coils in my stomach. How did I not think that he of all people, with his spies, would find out what I'd done? I wipe my hands against my velvet top. Despite his order, I pull on pants and boots before I go. No one stops me. I am vulnerable enough; I will keep what dignity I can.

Prince Dain is standing near the window, behind Madoc's desk. His back is to me, and my gaze goes automatically to the sword hanging from his

belt, visible beneath his heavy wool cloak. He does not turn when I come in.

"I have done wrong," I say. I am glad he stays where he is. It's easier to speak when he's not looking at me. "And I will repent in whatever way—"

He turns, his face full of a wild rage that makes me suddenly see his resemblance to Cardan. His hand comes down hard on Madoc's desk, rocking everything atop it. "Have I not taken you into my service and given you a great boon? Did I not promise you a place in my Court? And yet—*and yet*, you use what I have taught you to endanger my plans."

My gaze goes to the floor. He has the power to do anything to me. Anything. Not even Madoc could stop him—nor do I think he would try. And not only have I disobeyed him, I have declared my loyalty to something completely separate from him. I have helped a mortal girl. I have acted like a mortal.

I bite my bottom lip to keep from begging for his forgiveness. I cannot allow myself to speak.

"The boy wasn't as badly hurt as he might have been, but with the right knife—a longer knife—the strike would have been lethal. Do not think I don't know you were going for that worse strike."

I look up, suddenly, too surprised to hide it. We look at each other for several uncomfortable moments. I stare into the silvered gray of his eyes, taking note of the way his brows furrow, forming deep, displeased lines. I note all this to avoid thinking of how I almost gave away an even greater crime than the one he's discovered.

"Well?" he demands. "Had you no plan for being found out?"

"He tried to glamour me into jumping out of the tower," I say.

"And so he knows you can't be glamoured. Worse and worse." He comes around the desk toward me. "You are my creature, Jude Duarte. You will strike only when I tell you to strike. Otherwise, stay your hand. Do you understand?"

"No," I say automatically. What he's asking is ridiculous. "Was I supposed to just let him hurt me?"

If he knew all the things I'd really done, he would be even angrier than he is.

He slams a dagger down on Madoc's desk. "Pick it up," he says, and I feel the compulsion of a glamour. My fingers close on the hilt. A kind of

haziness comes over me. I both know and don't know what I am doing.

"In a moment, I am going to ask you to put the blade through your hand. When I ask you to do that, I want you to remember where your bones are, where your veins are. I want you to stab through your hand doing the least damage possible." His voice is lulling, hypnotic, but my heart speeds anyway.

Against my will, I aim the sharp point of the knife. I press it lightly against my skin. I am ready.

I hate him, but I am ready. I hate him, and I hate myself.

"Now," he says, and the glamour releases me. I take a half step back. I am in control of myself again, still holding the knife. He was about to make —

"Do not disappoint me," Prince Dain says.

I realize all at once that I have not gotten a reprieve. He hasn't released me because he wants to spare me. He could glamour me again, but he won't because he wants me to stab myself willingly. He wants me to prove my devotion, blood and bone. I hesitate—of course I hesitate. This is absurd. This is awful. This isn't how people show loyalty. This is epic, epic bullshit.

"Jude?" he asks. I cannot tell if this is a test he expects me to pass or one he wants me to fail. I think of Sophie at the bottom of the sea, her pockets full of stones. I think of the satisfaction on Valerian's face when he told me to jump from the tower. I think of Cardan's eyes, daring me to defy him.

I have tried to be better than them, and I have failed.

What could I become if I stopped worrying about death, about pain, about anything? If I stopped trying to belong?

Instead of being afraid, I could become something to fear.

My eyes on him, I slam the knife into my hand. The pain is a wave that rises higher and higher but never crashes. I make a sound low in my throat. I may not deserve punishment for this, but I deserve punishment.

Dain's expression is odd, blank. He takes a step back from me, as though I am the one who did the shocking thing instead of merely doing what he ordered. Then he clears his throat. "Do not reveal your skill with a blade," he says. "Do not reveal your mastery over glamour. Do not reveal all that you can do. Show your power by appearing powerless. That is what I need from you."

“Yes,” I gasp, and draw the blade out again. Blood runs over Madoc’s desk, more than I expect. I feel suddenly dizzy.

“Wipe it up,” he says. His jaw is set. Whatever surprise he felt seems gone, replaced by something else.

There is nothing to clean the desk with but the hem of my doublet.

“Now give me your hand.” Reluctantly, I hold it out to him, but all he does is take it gently and wrap it in a green cloth from his pocket. I try to flex my fingers and nearly pass out from pain. The fabric of the makeshift bandage is already turning dark. “Once I am gone, go to the kitchens and put moss on it.”

I nod again. I am not sure I can translate my thoughts into speech. I am afraid I am not going to be able to stand much longer, but I lock my knees and stare at the notch of chipped wood on Madoc’s desk where the tip of the blade hit, stained a bright but fading red.

The door to the study swings open, startling us both. Prince Dain drops my hand, and I shove it into my pocket, the pain of which nearly staggers me. Oriana stands there, a wooden tray in her hands with a steaming pot and three clay cups atop it. She is dressed in a day gown the vivid hue of unripe persimmons. “Prince Dain,” she says, making a pretty bow. “The servants said you were sequestered with Jude, and I told them they had to be mistaken. Surely, with your coronation so close, your time is too valuable for a silly girl to take up so much of it. You do her too much credit, and no doubt the weight of your regard is quite overwhelming.”

“No doubt,” he says, giving her a tooth-gritting smile. “I have tarried too long.”

“Take some tea before you leave us,” she says, putting down the tray on Madoc’s desk. “We could all have a cup and speak together. If Jude has done something to offend you …”

“Your pardon,” he says, not particularly kindly. “But your reminder of my duties spurs me to immediate action.”

He brushes past Oriana, looking back at me once before stalking off. I have no idea whether I passed the test or not. But either way, he does not trust me as he once did. I have thrown that away.

I don’t trust him as much, either.

“Thank you,” I say to Oriana. I am shivering all over.

She doesn’t scold me, for once. She doesn’t say anything. Her hands come down lightly on my shoulders, and I lean against her. The scent of crushed verbena is in my nose. I close my eyes and drink in the familiar smell. I am desperate. I will take any comfort there is, any comfort at all.

I do not think of lessons or lectures. Shaking all over, I go straight back to my room and climb into bed. Tatterfell strokes my hair briefly, as though I am a drowsy cat, and then returns to the task of sorting my dresses. My new gown is scheduled to arrive later today, and the coronation will begin the day after. Dain’s being named as the High King will kick off a month of revelry, while the moon wanes and then swells anew.

My hand hurts so much that I cannot bear to put moss on it. I just cradle it against my chest.

It throbs, the pain coming in staggering pulses, like a second, ragged heartbeat. I cannot bring myself to do more than lie there and wait for it to ebb. My thoughts drift dizzily.

Somewhere out there, all the lords and ladies and lieges ruling over far-flung Courts are arriving to pay their respects to the new High King. Night Courts and Bright Courts, Free Courts, and Wild Courts. The High King’s subjects and the Courts with which there are truces, however wobbly. Even Orlagh’s Court of the Undersea will be in attendance. Many will pledge themselves to faithfully accept the new High King’s judgment in exchange for his wisdom and protection. Pledge to defend him and avenge him, if need be. Then all will show their respect by partying their hardest.

I’ll be expected to party along with them. A month of dancing and feasting and boozing and riddling and dueling.

For that, each of my best dresses must be dusted off, pressed, and refreshed. Tatterfell sews on cunning cuffs made from the scales of pinecones around the edges of frayed sleeves. Small tears in skirts are stitched over with embroidery in the shape of leaves and pomegranates and —on one—a cavorting fox. She has stitched dozens of leather slippers for me. I will be expected to dance so fiercely that I wear through a pair every night.

At least Locke will be there to dance with me. I try to concentrate on the memory of his amber eyes instead of the pain in my hand.

As Tatterfell moves around the room, my eyes close, and I fall into a strange, fitful sleep. When I wake, it's full night, and I am sweaty all over. I feel oddly calm, though, tears and panic and pain somehow smoothed over. The agony of my hand has turned into a dull throb.

Tatterfell is gone. Vivi is sitting at the end of my bed, her cat eyes catching moonlight and shining chartreuse.

"I came to see if you were well," she says. "Except that of course you're not."

I force myself to sit up again, using only one of my hands. "I'm sorry—what I asked you to do. I shouldn't have. I put you in danger."

"I am your elder sister," she says. "You don't need to protect me from my own decisions."

After Sophie plunged into the water, Vivi and I spent the hours until dawn diving into the icy sea, calling for Sophie, trying to find some trace of her. We swam under the black water and screamed her name until our throats were hoarse.

"Still," I say.

"*Still*," she echoes fiercely. "I wanted to help. I wanted to help that girl."

"Too bad we didn't." The words catch in my throat.

Vivienne shrugs, and I am reminded of how, despite her being my sister, we differ in ways that are hard to comprehend. "You did a brave thing. Be glad of that. Not everyone can be brave. I'm not always."

"What do you mean? The whole 'not telling Heather what's really going on'?"

She makes a face at me but smiles, clearly grateful I am speaking of something less dire—and yet both of our thoughts went from one dead mortal girl to her beloved, also mortal. "We were lying in bed together a few days ago," Vivi says. "And she started tracing the shape of my ear. I thought she was going to ask something that would give me an opening, but she just told me my ear modding was really good. Did you know there are mortals who cut human ears and sew them so they heal pointed?"

I am not surprised. I understand longing for ears like hers. I feel like I have spent half my life wanting them, with their delicate, furred points.

What I do not say is this: No one could touch those ears and believe they were made by anything other than nature. Heather is either lying to Vivi or lying to herself.

“I don’t want her to be afraid of me,” Vivi says.

I think of Sophie, and I am sure Vivi is thinking of her, too, pockets full of stones. Sophie at the bottom of the sea. Perhaps she is not so unaffected by what happens as she wants to seem.

From downstairs, I hear Taryn’s voice. “They’re here! Our dresses! Come look!”

Slipping off my bed, Vivi smiles at me. “At least we had an adventure. And now we’re going to have another one.”

I let her go ahead, as I need to cover my bandaged hand with a glove before I follow her down the stairs. I press a button, ripped from a coat, over the wound to divert direct pressure. Now I have to hope that the bulge on my palm isn’t too noticeable.

Our gowns have been spread out over three chairs and a sofa in Oriana’s salon. Madoc is patiently listening to her rhapsodize over the perfection of their garments. Her ball gown is the exact pink of her eyes, deepening to red, and seems to be made of enormous petals that spread into a train. The fabric of Taryn’s is gorgeous, the cut of her mantua and stomacher perfect. Beside them is Oak’s sweet little suit of clothes, and there are a doublet and cape for Madoc in his favorite shade of crusted-blood red. Vivi holds up her silvery gray dress, with its tattered edges, sparing a smile for me.

Across the room, I see my gown. Taryn gasps when I lift it up.

“That’s not what you ordered,” she says, accusatory. As though somehow I have deliberately deceived her.

It’s true that the dress I am holding is not the one that Bramblewef t sketched for me. It’s something else entirely, something that reminds me of the mad, amazing garments that Locke’s mother’s closet was stuffed with. An ombré ball gown, its color deepening from white near my throat, through palest blue to deepest indigo at my feet. Over that is stitched the stark outlines of trees, the way I see them from my window as dusk is falling. The seamstress has even sewn on little crystal beads to represent stars.

This is a dress I could never have imagined, one so perfect that for a moment, looking at it, I can think of nothing but its beauty.

“I—I don’t think this is mine,” I say. “Taryn’s right. It doesn’t look anything like the sketches.”

“It’s still lovely,” Oriana says consolingly, as though I am displeased. “And it had your name pinned to it.”

I am glad no one is making me give it back. I do not know why I was given such a dress, but if there’s any way I can fit into it, I will.

Madoc raises his brows. “We will all look magnificent.” When he walks past, departing the salon, he ruffles my hair. In moments like these, it is almost possible to think there is no river of spilled blood between us all.

Oriana claps her hands together. “Girls, come here for a moment. Attend me.”

We three arrange ourselves on the couch beside her, waiting, puzzled.

“Tomorrow, you will be among the Gentry from many different Courts. You’ve been under Madoc’s protection, but that protection will be unknown to most of the Folk in attendance. You must not allow yourselves to be lured into making bargains or promises that can be used against you. And, above all, give no insult that might excuse a trespass of hospitality. Do not be foolish, and do not put yourself in anyone’s power.”

“We are never foolish,” Taryn says, a blatant lie if ever there was one.

Oriana makes a pained face. “I would keep you from the revels, but Madoc has specifically instructed that you participate in them. So heed my advice. Be careful, and perhaps you will find ways to be pleasing.”

I should have expected this—more cautions, another lecture. If she does not trust us to behave at a revel, she certainly will not trust us at a coronation. We rise, dismissed, and she takes each of us in turn, pressing her chilly mouth against our cheeks. My kiss comes last.

“Do not aspire above your station,” she says softly to me.

For a moment, I don’t understand why she would say that. Then, horrified, I get her meaning. After this afternoon, she thinks I am Prince Dain’s lover.

“I’m not,” I blurt out. Of course, Cardan would say that *everything* I’ve got is above my station.

She takes my hand, her expression pitying.

“I am only thinking of your future,” Oriana says, voice still soft. “Those close to the throne are seldom truly close to anyone else. A mortal girl would have even fewer allies.”

I nod as though giving in to her wise advice. If she doesn't believe me, then the easiest thing is to go along with her. I guess it makes more sense than the truth—that Dain has selected me to be part of his nest of thieves and spies.

Something about my expression causes her to catch both of my hands. I wince at the pressure on my wound. "Before I was Madoc's wife, I was one of the consorts to the King of Elfhame. Hear me, Jude. It is no easy thing to be the lover of the High King. It is to always be in danger. It is to always be a pawn."

I must be gaping at her, as shocked as I am. I never wondered about her life before she came to us. Suddenly, Oriana's fears for us make a different kind of sense; she was used to playing by an entirely different set of rules. The floor seems to have tilted beneath my feet. I do not know the woman in front of me, do not know what she suffered before coming to this house, no longer even know how she really came to be Madoc's wife. Did she love him, or was she making a clever marriage, to gain his protection?

"I didn't know," I say stupidly.

"I never gave Eldred a child," she tells me. "But another of his lovers nearly did. When she died, rumor pointed to one of the princes' poisoning her, just to prevent competition for the throne." Oriana watches my face with her pale pink eyes. I know she's talking about Liriope. "You don't need to believe me. There are a dozen more rumors just as terrible. When there is a lot of power concentrated in one place, there are plenty of scraps to fight over. If the Court isn't busy drinking poison, then it's drinking bile. You wouldn't be well suited to it."

"What makes you think that?" I ask, her words annoyingly close to Madoc's when he dismissed my chances at knighthood. "Maybe it would suit me just fine."

Her fingers brush my face again, stroking back my hair. It should be a tender gesture, but it's an evaluating one instead. "He must have loved your mother very much," she says. "He's besotted with you girls. If I were him, I would have sent you away a long time ago."

I don't doubt that.

"If you go to Prince Dain despite my warning, if he gets his heir on you, tell no one before you tell me. Swear it on your mother's grave." I feel her

nails as her hand comes to rest against the back of my neck and wince. “No one. Do you understand?”

“I promise.” This is one vow I should have no trouble keeping. I try to give the words weight, so she’ll believe I mean it. “Seriously. I promise.”

She releases me. “You may go. Rest well, Jude. When you rise, the coronation will be upon us, and there will be little time left for resting.”

I curtsy and take my leave.

In the hall, Taryn is waiting for me. She sits on a bench carved with coiled serpents and swings her feet. As the door closes, she looks up. “What was going on with her?”

I shake my head, trying to rid myself of a jumble of feelings. “Did you know she used to be the High King’s consort?”

Taryn’s eyebrows go up, and she snorts, delighted. “No. Is that what she told you?”

“Pretty much.” I think of Locke’s mother and the singing bird in the acorn, of Eldred on his throne, head bowed by his own crown. It is hard for me to picture him taking lovers, no less the quantity he must have taken to have so many children, an unnatural number for a Faerie. And yet, perhaps that’s just a failure of my imagination.

“Huh.” Taryn looks as though she’s having the same failure of imagination. She frowns, puzzling for a moment, then seems to remember what she’d waited to ask me. “Do you know why Prince Balekin was here?”

“He was here?” I am not sure I can weather more surprises. “Here, in the house?”

She nods. “He arrived with Madoc, and they were shut up in his office for hours.”

I wonder how long they arrived after Prince Dain’s departure. Hopefully, long enough for Prince Dain not to overhear anything about a missing servant. My hand throbs whenever I move it, but I am just glad I can move it at all. I am not eager to face any more punishment.

And yet Madoc didn’t seem angry with me just now when he saw me with my dress. He seemed normal, pleased even. Perhaps they were conferring about other things.

“Weird,” I say to Taryn, because I am commanded not to tell her about being a spy and I cannot bring myself to tell her about Sophie.

I am glad that the coronation is nearly here. I want it to come and sweep everything else away.

That night, I drowse in my bed, fully dressed, waiting for the Ghost. I have bagged out on lessons for two nights straight—the night of Locke's party and last night, searching the water for Sophie. He's bound to be annoyed when he comes.

I put that as far out of my head as I can and concentrate on resting. Breathing in and out.

When I first came to Faerie, I had trouble sleeping. You'd think I'd have had nightmares, but I don't remember many. My dreams struggled to rival the horror of my actual life. Instead, I couldn't calm down enough to rest. I would toss and turn all night and all morning, my heart racing, finally falling into a headachy sleep in the late afternoon, when the rest of Faerie was just rising. I took to wandering the corridors of the house like a restless spirit, thumbing through ancient books, moving around the game pieces on the Fox and Geese board, toasting cheese in the kitchens, and staring at Madoc's blood-soaked cap, as though it contained the answers to the universe in its tide lines. One of the hobs who used to work here, Nell Uther, would find me and guide me back to my room, telling me that if I couldn't sleep, then I ought to just close my eyes and lie still. That at least my body could rest, even if my mind wouldn't.

I am lying like that when I hear a rustling on the balcony. I turn, fully expecting to see the Ghost. I am about to tease him for actually making a sound when I realize the person rattling the doors isn't the Ghost at all. It's Valerian, and he has a long, curving knife in one hand and a smile every bit as sharp pulling at his mouth.

"What …" I scramble into a sitting position. "What are you doing here?"

I realize that I am whispering, as though *I* am afraid of *his* being discovered.

You are my creature, Jude Duarte. You will strike only when I tell you to strike. Otherwise, stay your hand.

At least Prince Dain didn't glamour me to obey those orders.

“Why shouldn’t I be here?” Valerian asks me, striding closer. He smells like pinesap and burned hair, and there is a light dusting of golden powder streaked over one cheek. I am not sure where he’s been before this, but I don’t think he’s sober.

“This is my home.” I am prepared for training with the Ghost. I have a knife in my boot and another at my hip, but thinking of Dain’s command, thinking of how not to disappoint him further, I reach for neither. I am flummoxed by Valerian’s being here, in my room.

He walks up to my bed. He’s holding the knife well enough, but I can tell he’s not particularly practiced with it. He is no general’s son. “*None of this is your home*,” he tells me, voice shaking with anger.

“If Cardan put you up to this, you should really rethink your relationship,” I say, finally, now, afraid. By some miracle, my voice stays steady. “Because if I scream, there are guards in the hall. They’ll come. They’ve got big, pointy swords. Huge. Your friend is going to get you killed.”

Show your power by appearing powerless.

He doesn’t seem to be absorbing my words. His eyes are wild, red-rimmed, and not entirely focused on me. “Do you know what he said when I told him you’d stabbed me? He told me it was no more than I deserved.”

That’s impossible; Valerian must have misunderstood. Cardan must have been mocking him for letting me under his guard.

“What did you expect?” I ask him, trying to hide my surprise. “I don’t know if you noticed, but the guy is a real jerk.”

If Valerian wasn’t sure he wanted to stab me before, he’s sure now. With a leap, he slams the blade into the mattress as I roll out of the way and onto my feet. Goose feathers fly up when he draws back the blade, drifting through the air like snow. He scrambles to his feet as I pull out a dagger of my own.

Do not reveal your skill with a blade. Do not reveal your mastery over glamour. Do not reveal all that you can do.

Little did Prince Dain know that my real skill lies in pissing people off.

Valerian advances on me again. He’s intoxicated and furious and not all that well trained, but he’s one of the Folk, born with their cat reflexes and blessed with height that gives him better reach. My heart is hammering in my chest. I should scream for help. I should scream.

I open my mouth, and he lunges at me. The scream comes out as a whuff of breath as I lose my balance. My shoulder hits the floor hard as I roll again. I am practiced enough that despite my surprise, I kick his knife hand when he comes toward me. The blade skitters across the floor.

“Okay,” I say, as though I am trying to calm us both down. “Okay.”

He doesn’t pause. Even though I am holding a knife, even though I’ve avoided his attacks twice and disarmed him, even though I’ve stabbed him once before, he grabs for my throat again. His fingers sink into the flesh of my neck, and I remember how it felt to have fruit jammed into my mouth, soft flesh parting against my teeth. I remember choking on nectar and pulp as the horrible bliss of the everapple stole over me, robbing me of caring even that I was dying. He’d wanted to watch me die, wanted to watch me fight for breath the way I am fighting for it now. I look into his eyes and find the same expression there.

You are nothing. You barely exist at all. Your only purpose is to create more of your kind before you die.

He’s wrong about me. I am going to make my mayfly life count for something.

I won’t be afraid of him or of Prince Dain’s censure. If I cannot be better than them, I will become so much worse.

Despite his fingers against my windpipe, despite the way my vision has begun to go dark around the edges, I make sure of my strike before I drive my knife into his chest. Into his heart.

Valerian rolls off me, making a gurgling sound. I suck in lungfuls of air. He tries to stand, sways, and falls back to his knees. Looking over at him dizzily, I see the hilt of my knife is sticking out of his chest. The red velvet of his doublet is turning a deeper, wetter red.

He reaches for the blade as though to draw it out.

“Don’t,” I say automatically, because that will only make the wound worse. I grab for anything nearby—there is a discarded petticoat on the floor that I can use to stanch the blood. He slides down onto his side, away from me, and sneers, although he can barely open his eyes.

“You’ve got to let me—” I start.

“I curse you,” Valerian whispers. “I curse you. Three times, I curse you. As you’ve murdered me, may your hands always be stained with blood. May death be your only companion. May you—” He breaks off abruptly,

coughing. When he stops, he doesn’t stir. His eyes stay as they are, half-lidded, but the gleam has gone out of them.

My wounded hand flies to cover my mouth in horror at the curse, as though to stop a scream, but I don’t scream. I haven’t screamed this whole time, and I am not going to start now, when there’s nothing more to scream about.

As minutes slip by, I just sit there beside Valerian, watching the skin of his face grow paler as the blood no longer pumps to it, watching his lips go a kind of greenish blue. He doesn’t die very differently than mortals, although I am sure it would gall him to know that. He might have lived for a thousand years, if it wasn’t for me.

My hand hurts worse than ever. I must have banged it in the fight.

I look around and catch my own reflection in the mirror across the room: a human girl, hair tousled, eyes feverish, a pool of blood forming at her feet.

The Ghost is coming. He’d know what to do with a dead body. He has certainly killed people before. But Prince Dain is already angry with me just for stabbing the child of a well-favored member of his Court. Killing that same child the night before Dain’s coronation won’t go over well. The last people I need to know about this are the Court of Shadows.

No, I need to hide the body myself.

I scan the room, hoping for inspiration, but the only place I can think of that will even conceal him temporarily is beneath my bed. I spread the petticoat next to Valerian’s body and then roll him onto it. I feel a little queasy. His body is still warm. Ignoring that, I drag him over to the bed and push him and all the skirts under, first with my hands and then with my feet.

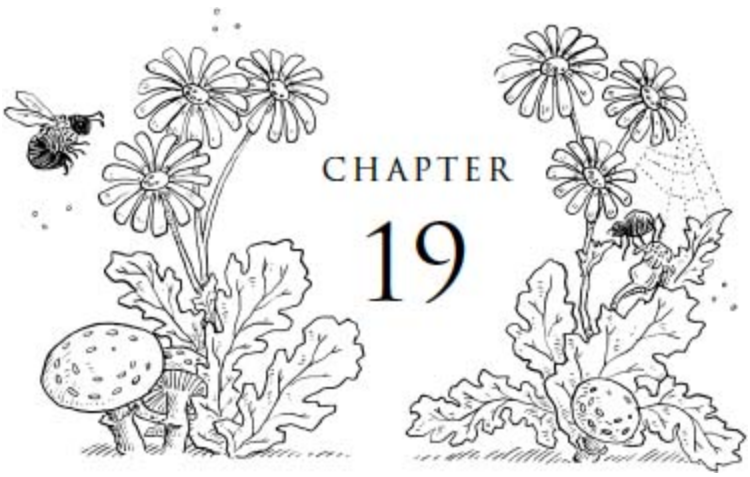
Only a smear of blood remains. I get the pitcher of water near the bedpan and splash some on the wooden planks of the floor and then some on my face. My good hand is shaking as I finish wiping up, and I sink to the floor, both hands in my hair.

I am not okay.

I am not okay.

I am not okay.

But when the Ghost arrives on my balcony, he can’t tell, and that’s the important thing.



That night, the Ghost shows me how to climb far higher than the landing where Taryn and I tarried the last time. We climb all the way up to the rafters above the great hall and perch on heavy wooden beams. They are coiled around with a lattice of roots, which sometimes form the shapes of cages, sometimes balconies, and sometimes what appear more like tightropes. Beneath us, the preparations for the coronation go on. Blue velvet and hammered silver and braided gold tablecloths are rolled out, each one decorated with the House of Greenbriar's standard, a tree of flowers, thorns, and roots.

"Do you think things will be better after Prince Dain becomes the High King?" I ask him.

The Ghost gives me a vague smile and shakes his head sadly. "Things will be as they always are," he tells me. "Only more so."

I don't know what that means, but it's a fey enough answer that I figure I am unlikely to get more out of him. I think of Valerian's body under my bed. The Folk do not rot the way mortals do. Sometimes their bodies grow over with lichen or bloom with mushrooms. I've heard stories about battlefields turning into green hills. I wish I could go back and find that he'd turned into mulch, but I doubt I will be that lucky.

I shouldn’t be thinking about his body; I should be thinking about *him*. I should be worrying over more than getting caught.

We walk across roots and beams, unnoticed, jumping silently high above swarms of liveried servants. I turn to the Ghost, watching his calm face and the expert way he places each foot. I try to do the same. I try not to use my sore hand for anything more than balance. He seems to notice, but he doesn’t ask. Maybe he already knows what happened.

“Now wait,” he says as we settle onto a heavy beam.

“For anything in particular?” I ask.

“I have word that a messenger is coming from Balekin’s estate, disguised in the High King’s livery,” he says. “We’re to kill it before it enters the royal quarters.”

The Ghost says this without particular emotion. I wonder how long he has worked for Dain. I wonder if Dain ever asked him to drive a knife through his palm, if he tested them all that way, or if that was a special test, just for mortals.

“Is the messenger going to assassinate Prince Dain?” I ask.

“Let’s not find out,” he says.

Below me, spun-sugar creations are being finished off with high crystalline spires. Apples painted with nevermore are piled on the banquet tables in such quantity as to send half the Court dreaming.

I think of Cardan’s mouth, flaked with gold. “Are you sure they’re coming this way?”

“I am,” he says, and no more than that.

So we wait, and I try not to fidget as minutes slide into hours, moving just enough to keep my muscles from stiffening. This is part of my training—probably the aspect the Ghost thinks is most essential, after slyfooting. He has told me again and again that most of being a killer and a thief is waiting. The hardest thing, according to him, is not letting your mind drift to other things. He seems to be right. Up here, watching the ebb and flow of the servants, my thoughts turn to the coronation, to the drowned girl, to Cardan riding up on his horse as I fled Hollow Hall, to Valerian’s frozen, dying smile.

I wrench my thoughts back to the present. Beneath me, a creature with a long, hairless tail that drags in the dirt scuttles across the ground. For a moment, I think it is part of the kitchen staff. But the bag it carries is too

filthy, and there is something subtly wrong with its livery. It isn't dressed like one of Balekin's servants, and neither is its uniform the same as the other palace staff.

I glance over at the Ghost.

"Good," he says. "Now shoot."

My hands feel sweaty as I draw out the miniature crossbow, seeking to steady it against my arm. I have grown up in a house of butchery. I have trained for this. My principal childhood memory is of bloodshed. I have killed already tonight. And yet, for a moment, I am not sure I can do it.

You're no killer.

I take a breath and loose the bolt. My arm spasms from the recoil. The creature topples over, a flailing arm sending a pyramid of golden apples spilling to the dirt. I press myself down against a thick cluster of roots, camouflaging myself as I've been taught. Servants scream, looking around for the shooter.

Next to me, the Ghost has a smile on the corner of his mouth. "Was that your first?" he asks me. And then when I look at him blankly, he clarifies. "Have you ever killed anyone before?"

May death be your only companion.

I shake my head, not trusting myself to speak the lie out loud convincingly.

"Sometimes mortals throw up. Or cry," he says, clearly pleased I am doing neither of those things. "It shouldn't shame you."

"I feel fine," I say, taking a deep breath and fitting a new bolt into the bow.

What I feel is a kind of nervous adrenaline-soaked readiness. I seem to have passed some kind of threshold. Before, I never knew how far I would go. Now I believe I have the answer. I will go as far as there is to go. I will go way too far.

He raises both brows. "You're good at this. Nice marksmanship and a stomach for violence."

I am surprised. The Ghost is not given to compliments.

I have vowed to become worse than my rivals. Two murders completed in a single night mark a descent I should be proud of. Madoc could not have been more wrong about me.

“Most of the children of the Gentry don’t have the patience,” he says. “And they’re not used to getting their hands dirty.”

I do not know what to say to that, with Valerian’s curse fresh in my mind. Maybe there’s something broken in me from watching my parents being murdered. Maybe my messed-up life turned me into someone capable of doing messed-up things. But another part of me wonders if I was raised by Madoc in the family business of bloodshed. Am I like this because of what he did to my parents or because he was my parent?

May your hands always be stained with blood.

The Ghost reaches out to grab my wrist, and before I can snatch it back, he points to the pale half moons at the base of my nails. “Speaking of hands, I can see what you’ve been doing in the discoloration of your fingers. The blue cast. I can smell it in your sweat, too. You’ve been poisoning yourself.”

I swallow, and then, because there’s no reason to deny it, I nod.

“Why?” The thing I like about the Ghost is that I can tell he’s not asking to set me up for a lecture. He just seems curious.

I am not sure how to explain it. “Being mortal means I have to try harder.”

The Ghost studies my face. “Someone’s really sold you a bill of goods. Plenty of mortals are better at plenty of stuff than the Folk. Why do you think we steal them away?”

It takes me a moment to realize he’s serious. “So I could be …?” I can’t finish the sentence.

He snorts. “Better than me? Don’t press your luck.”

“That’s not what I was going to say,” I protest, but he only grins. I look down. The body is still lying there. A few knights have gathered around it. As soon as they move the body, we will move, too. “I just need to be able to vanquish my enemies. That’s all.”

He looks surprised. “Do you have a lot of enemies, then?” I am sure he imagines me among the children of the Gentry, with their soft hands and velvet skirts. He thinks of little cruelties, small slights, minor snubs.

“Not many,” I say, thinking of the lazy, hateful look Cardan gave me by torchlight in the hedge maze. “But they’re quality.”

When the knights finally bear the body away and no one is searching for us anymore, the Ghost leads me across the roots again. We slip through

corridors until he can get close enough to the messenger bag to light-finger the papers inside. Up close, though, I realize something that chills my blood. The messenger was disguised. The creature is female, and while her tail is fake, her long parsnip nose is entirely real. She's one of Madoc's spies.

The Ghost tucks the note into his jacket and doesn't unroll it until we're out in the woods, with only moonlight to see by. When he looks, though, his expression turns stony. He's gripping the paper so hard it's crinkling in his fingers.

"What does it say?" I ask.

He turns the page toward me. There, six words are scrawled: KILL THE BEARER OF THIS MESSAGE.

"What does that mean?" I ask, feeling sick.

The Ghost shakes his head. "It means that Balekin set us up. Come on. We need to go."

He pulls me along into the shadows, and together we slink away. I do not tell the Ghost that I thought she worked for Madoc. Instead, I try to puzzle through things myself. But I have too few pieces.

What does the murder of Liriope have to do with the coronation? What does Madoc have to do with any of this? Could his spy have been a double agent, working for Balekin as well as Madoc? If so, does that mean she was stealing information from my household?

"Someone is trying to distract us," the Ghost says. "While they set their trap. Be alert tomorrow."

The Ghost doesn't give me any more specific orders, doesn't even tell me to stop taking my tiny doses of poison. He doesn't direct me to do anything differently; he leads me home to catch scraps of sleep just after dawn. As we're about to part, I want to stop and throw myself on his mercy. *I've done a terrible thing*, I want to say. *Help me with the body. Help me.*

But we all want stupid things. That doesn't mean we should have them.

I bury Valerian near the stables, but outside the paddock, so that even the most carnivorous of Madoc's sharp-toothed horses are unlikely to dig him

up and gnaw on his bones.

It’s not easy to bury a body. It’s especially not easy to bury a body without your whole household finding out. I must roll Valerian onto my balcony and hurl him into the brush below. Then, one-handed, I must drag him away from the house. I am straining and sweating by the time I get to a likely plot of dew-covered grass. Newly woken birds call to one another beneath the brightening sky.

For a moment, all I want to do is lie down myself.

But I still have to dig.

The next afternoon is a sleep-deprived blur of being painted and braided, corseted and cinched. Three fat gold earrings run up the side of one of Madoc’s green ears, and he wears long gold claws over his fingers. Oriana looks like a rose in bloom beside him, wearing a massive necklace of rough-cut green emeralds at her throat, large enough to nearly count as armor.

In my room, I unwrap my hand. It looks worse than I had hoped—wet and sticking instead of scabbed over. Swollen. I finally take Dain’s advice and get some moss from the kitchens, wash the wound, and rewrap it with my makeshift button brace. I wasn’t planning to wear gloves to the coronation, but I don’t have much choice. Hunting around in my drawers, I find a set in a dark blue silk and draw them on.

I imagine Locke taking my hands tonight, imagine him sweeping me around the hill. I hope I can avoid flinching if he presses on my palm. I can never let him guess what happened to Valerian. No matter how much he likes me, he wouldn’t like kissing the person who put his friend in the ground.

My sisters and I pass one another in the hall as we dart around, grabbing stray things we need. Vivienne goes through my jewelry cabinet, finding nothing adequately matching her ghostly dress in her own.

“You’re actually coming with us,” I say. “Madoc will be stunned.”

I am wearing a choker to cover the bruises blooming on my throat where Valerian’s fingers sank into my skin. When Vivi gets down on her knees to

sort through a tangle of earrings, I have a terror that she will glance beneath my bed and see some smear of blood I have missed cleaning. I am so worried that I barely register her smile.

“I like to keep everyone on their toes,” she says. “Besides, I want to gossip with Princess Rhyia and see the spectacle of so many rulers of faerie Courts in one place. But most of all, I want to meet Taryn’s mysterious suitor and see what Madoc makes of his proposal.”

“Do you have any idea who he is?” I ask. With everything that’s happened, I had nearly forgotten about him.

“Not even a guess. Do you?” She finds what she is looking for—iridescent gray labradorite drops given to me by Taryn for my sixteenth birthday, forged by a goblin tinker with whom she traded three kisses.

In idle moments, I have turned over and over who might ask for her hand. I think of the way Cardan pulled her aside and made her cry. I think of Valerian’s leer. Of the way she shoved me too hard when I teased her about Balekin, although I am almost certain it isn’t him. My head swims, and I want to lie back down on the bed and close my eyes. Please, please let it be none of them. Let it be someone nice we don’t know.

I remind myself of what she said: *I think you would like him.*

Turning to Vivi, I am about to start making a list of safer possibilities when Madoc comes into the room. He’s holding a slim silver-sheathed blade in one hand.

“Vivienne,” he says with a little dip of his head. “Could you give me a moment with Jude here?”

“Sure, *Daddy*,” she says with small, poisonous emphasis as she slips out with my earrings.

He clears his throat a little awkwardly and holds the silver sword out to me. The guard and pommel are unadorned, elegantly shaped. The blade is etched along the fuller with a barely visible pattern of vines. “I have something I’d like you to wear tonight. It’s a gift.”

I think I make a little gasp. It’s a really, really, really pretty sword.

“You’ve been training so diligently that I knew it should be yours. Its maker called it Nightfell, but of course you are welcome to call it anything you like or nothing at all. It’s said to bring the wielder luck, but everyone says that about swords, don’t they? It’s something of a family heirloom.”

Oriana's words come back to me: *He's besotted with you girls. He must have loved your mother very much.* "But what about Oak?" I blurt out. "What if he wants it?"

Madoc gives me a small smile. "Do *you* want it?"

"Yes," I say, unable to help myself. When I pull it from its sheath, it comes as though made for my hand. The balance is perfect. "Yes, of course I do."

"That's good, because this is your sword by right, forged for me by your father, Justin Duarte. He's the one who crafted it, the one who named it. It's *your* family heirloom."

I am momentarily robbed of breath. I have never heard my father's name spoken aloud by Madoc before. We do not talk about the fact that he murdered my parents; we talk around it.

We certainly don't talk about when they were alive.

"My father made this," I say carefully, to be sure. "My father was here, in Faerie?"

"Yes, for several years. I only have a few pieces of his. I found two, one for you and one for Taryn." He grimaces. "This is where your mother met him. Then they ran away together, back to the mortal world."

I take a shuddering breath, finding the courage to ask a question I have often wondered but never dared voice aloud. "What were they like?" I flinch as the words leave my mouth. I don't even know if I want him to tell me. Sometimes I just want to hate her; if I can hate her, then it won't be so bad that I love him.

But, of course, she's still my mother. The only thing I can truly be angry with her for is being gone, and that's certainly not her fault.

Madoc sits down on the goat-footed stool in front of my dressing table and stretches out his bad leg, looking for all the world as though he's about to tell me a bedtime story. "She was clever, your mother. And young. After I brought her to Faerie, she drank and danced weeks away at a time. She was at the center of every revel.

"I could not always accompany her. There was a war in the East, an Unseelie king with a lot of territory and no desire to bend his knee to the High King. But I drank in her happiness when I was here. She had a way of making everyone around her feel as though every impossible thing was possible. I suppose I put it down to her mortality, but I don't think I was

being fair. It was something else. Her daring, perhaps. She never seemed cowed, not by any of the magic, not by anything."

I thought he might be angry, but he obviously isn't. In fact, his voice holds a totally unexpected fondness. I sit down on the bench in front of my bed, holding on to my new silver sword for support.

"Your father was interesting. I imagine you think I didn't know him, but he came to my house—my old house, the one they burned down—many times. We drank honey wine in the gardens, the three of us. He loved swords, he said, from the time he was a child. When he was around your age, he persuaded his parents to allow him to build his first forge in their backyard.

"Instead of going to college, he found a master swordsmith to take him on as an apprentice. From there, he got himself introduced to an assistant curator in a museum. She snuck him in after hours, allowing him to see ancient swords up close and honing his craft. But then he heard about the kinds of blades that could be wrought only by the fey, so he came looking for us.

"He was a master smith when he came here and even better when he left. But he couldn't resist bragging about stealing our secrets along with his bride. Eventually, the tale came to Balekin, who gave it to me."

If my father had really talked with Madoc, he ought to have known better than to brag about stealing from him. But I have stood on the streets of the mortal world and felt how far it seems from Elfhame. As the years passed, his time in Faerie must have seemed like a distant dream.

"There is little good in me," Madoc says. "But I owe you a debt, and I have sworn to do the best by you that I know how."

I rise, crossing the room to put one gloved hand against the pallid green skin of his face. He closes his cat eyes. I cannot forgive him, but I cannot hate him, either. We stand like that for a long moment, then he looks up, takes my unbandaged hand, and kisses the back of it, mouth against cloth.

"After today, things will be different," he tells me. "I will wait for you in the carriage."

He leaves me. I hold my head. My thoughts will not focus. When I rise, though, I strap on my new sword. It is cold and solid in my hands, heavy as a promise.

Oak is in cricket green, dancing around in front of the carriage. When he sees me, he runs over, wanting me to carry him, then he runs off to pet the horses before I can. He is a faerie child, with a faerie child's whims.

Taryn is beautiful in her heavily embroidered dress, and Vivi radiant in soft violet gray with artfully sewn moths seeming to fly from her shoulder across her chest to gather in another group on one side of her waist. I realize how rarely I've seen her in truly splendid clothes. Her hair is up, and my earrings glitter in her lightly furred ears. Her cat eyes gleam in the half light, twin to Madoc's. For once, that makes me smile. I take Taryn's hand with my undamaged one, and she squeezes it, hard. We grin at each other, conspirators for once.

In the carriage, there is a hamper of things to eat, which was smart of someone, because none of us has remembered to eat enough all day. I remove a glove and eat two small rolls of bread so light and filled with air that they seem to dissolve on my tongue. At the center of each is a mass of honeyed raisins and nuts, their sweetness enough to bring tears to my eyes. Madoc passes me a slab of pale yellow cheese and a still-bloody slice of juniper-and-pepper-crusted venison. We make quick work of the food.

I spot Madoc's red cap, half in and half out of his front pocket. His version of a medal, I suppose, to be worn on state occasions.

None of us really speaks. I do not know what the others dwell on, but abruptly, I realize I am going to have to dance. I am terrible at dancing, since I have no practice in it other than humiliating lessons at school, partnered with Taryn.

I think of the Ghost and the Roach and the Bomb, trying to safeguard Dain against whatever Balekin has planned. I wish I knew what to do, how to help them.

KILL THE BEARER OF THIS MESSAGE.

I look over at Madoc, drinking spiced wine. He seems entirely comfortable, totally unaware of—or unconcerned with—the loss of one of his spies.

My heartbeat drums faster. I keep remembering not to wipe my hand on my skirts for fear of smearing them with food. Eventually, Oriana pulls out some handkerchiefs soaked in rose and mint water for us to wipe ourselves down with. This sets off a chase, with Oak trying to avoid being washed. There isn't far for him to run in the carriage, but he keeps it going longer than you'd think, stepping on all of us in the process.

I am so distracted I don't even automatically brace when we go straight through the rock and into the palace. We're lurching to a stop before I even notice we've arrived. A footman opens the door, and I see the whole courtyard, filled with music and voices and merriment. And candles, forests of them, the wax melting to create an effect like termite-eaten wood. Candles rest atop tree branches, flames flickering with the whoosh of dresses sweeping below. They line the walls like sentries and clump in tight arrangements on stones, lighting up the hill.

"Ready?" Taryn whispers to me.

"Yes," I say a little breathlessly.

We pile out of the carriage. Oriana has a little silver leash she attaches to Oak's wrist, which strikes me as not the worst idea, although he whines and sits in the dirt in protest, like a cat.

Vivienne looks around the courtyard. There's something feral in her gaze. Her nose flares. "Are we supposed to present ourselves to the High King one last time?" she asks Madoc.

He gives a half shake of his head. "No. We will be called forth when it is time to take our oaths. Until then, I must stand beside Prince Dain. The rest

of you should go enjoy yourselves until the bells chime and Val Moren begins the ceremony. Then, come to the throne room to witness the coronation. I'd have you close to the dais, where my knights can look after you."

I turn toward Oriana, expecting another speech about not getting into trouble or even a new speech about keeping my legs closed around royalty, but she is too busy pleading with Oak to get out of the road.

"Let's party," Vivi says, sweeping Taryn and me along with her. We escape into the crowd, and moments later, we are drowning in it.

The Palace of Elfhame is packed with bodies. The unallied wild fey, courtiers, and monarchs mingle together. Selkies from Queen Orlagh's Court of the Undersea speak together in their own language, skins slung from their shoulders like capes. I spot the lord of the Court of Termites, Roiben, who is said to have killed his own lover to win a throne. He stands near one of the long trestle tables, and even in the cramped hall, there is space around him, as though no one dares get too close. His hair is the color of salt, his garments entirely black, and a deadly curved sword sits at his hip. Incongruously, beside him, a green-skinned pixie girl is dressed in what appears to be a pearl-gray slip dress and heavy lace-up boots—obviously mortal clothes. And standing on either side of the pixie are two knights in his livery, one with scarlet hair braided into a crown on her head. Dulcamara, who lectured us on the crown.

There are others, figures I have heard of in ballads: Rue Silver of New Avalon, who cut her island out of the California coast, is talking to the exiled Alderking's son, Severin, who might try to ally with the new High King or might join Lord Roiben's Court. He's with a red-haired human boy about my age, which makes me pause to study them. Is the boy his servant? Is he enchanted? I can't tell just from the way he looks around the room, but when he sees me staring, he grins.

I turn quickly away.

As I do, the selkies shift, and I spot someone else with them. Gray-skinned and blue-lipped, hair hanging around her sunken-eyed face. But despite all that, I recognize her. Sophie. I had heard stories about the merfolk of the Undersea keeping drowned sailors, but I didn't believe them. When her mouth moves, I see that she has sharp teeth. A shudder ripples across my shoulders.

I stumble along after Vivi and Taryn. When I look back, I don't see Sophie, and I am not entirely sure I didn't imagine her.

We slide past a shagfoal and a barghest. Everyone is laughing too loudly, dancing too fiercely. As I pass one reveler in a goblin mask, he lifts it and winks at me. It's the Roach.

"Heard about the other night. Good work," he says. "Now keep your eyes out for anything that seems amiss. If Balekin's going to move against Dain, he's going to do it before the ceremony starts."

"I will," I say, pulling free of my sisters to tarry with him a moment. In a crowd this size, it's easy to be briefly lost.

"Good. Came to see Prince Dain win the crown with my own eyes." He reaches into his leaf-brown jacket and pulls out a silver flask, popping the top and taking a swig. "Plus watching the Gentry cavort and make fools out of themselves."

He holds the flask out to me with one gray-green clawed hand. Even from there, I can smell whatever is inside, pungent and strong and a little swampy. "I'm okay," I say, shaking my head.

"You sure are," he tells me, laughing, and then pulls down his mask again.

I am left grinning after him as he sweeps away into the crowd. Just seeing him has filled me with a sense of finally belonging to this place. He and the Ghost and the Bomb are not precisely my friends, but they actually seem to like me, and I am not inclined to split hairs. I have a place with them and a purpose.

"Where have you been?" Vivienne asks, grabbing hold of me. "You need a leash like Oak's. Come on, we're going to dance."

I eddy along with them. There's music everywhere, urging a lightness of step. They say the pull of faerie music is impossible to resist, which isn't quite true. What's impossible is to stop dancing once you've begun, so long as the music goes on. And it does, all night, one dance bleeding into the next, one song becoming another without a pause to catch your breath. It's exhilarating to be caught up in the music, to be swept away in the tide of it. Of course, Vivi, being one of them, can stop whenever she wants. She can also yank us out, so dancing with her is almost safe. Not that Vivi always remembers to do the safe thing.

But really, I am the last person to judge anyone for that.

We clasp hands and join the circle dance, leaping and laughing. The song feels as though it is calling my blood, moving it through my veins to the same ragged beat, with the same sweet chords. The circle breaks up, and somehow I am holding Locke's hands. He sweeps me around in a giddy whoosh.

"You are very beautiful," he says. "Like a winter night."

He smiles down at me with his fox eyes. His russet hair curls around his pointed ears. From one lobe, a golden earring dangles, catching the candlelight like a mirror. He's the one who's beautiful, a kind of breathless, inhuman beauty.

"I'm glad you like the dress," I manage.

"Tell me, could you love me?" he asks, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Of course." I laugh, not sure of the answer I am supposed to give. But the question is so oddly phrased that I can hardly deny him. I love my parents' murderer; I suppose I could love anyone. I'd *like* to love him.

"I wonder," he says. "What would you do for me?"

"I don't know what you mean." This riddling figure with flinty eyes isn't the Locke who stood on the rooftop of his estate and spoke so gently to me or who chased me, laughing, through its halls. I am not quite sure who this Locke is, but he has put me entirely off balance.

"Would you forswear a promise for me?" He is smiling at me as though he's teasing.

"What promise?" He sweeps me around him, my leather slippers pirouetting over the packed earth. In the distance, a piper begins to play.

"Any promise," he says lightly, although it is no light thing he is asking.

"I guess it depends," I say, because the real answer, a flat no, isn't what anyone wants to hear.

"Do you love me enough to give me up?" I am sure my expression is stricken. He leans closer. "Isn't that a test of love?"

"I—I don't know," I say. All this must be leading up to some declaration on his part, either of affection or of a lack of it.

"Do you love me enough to weep over me?" The words are spoken against my neck. I can feel his breath, making the tiny hairs stand up, making me shudder with an odd combination of desire and discomfort.

"You mean if you were hurt?"

"I mean if I hurt you."

My skin prickles. I don’t like this. But at least I know what to say. “If you hurt me, I wouldn’t cry. I would hurt you back.”

His step falters as we sweep over the floor. “I’m sure you’d—”

And then he breaks off speaking, looking behind him. I can barely think. My face is hot. I dread what he will say next.

“Time to change partners,” a voice says, and I look to see that it’s the worst person possible: Cardan. “Oh,” he says to Locke. “Did I steal your line?”

His tone is unfriendly, and as I turn his words over in my mind, they do little to comfort me.

Locke relinquishes me to the youngest prince, as is expected out of deference. I see out of the corner of my eye that Taryn is watching us. She’s standing frozen in the middle of the revel, looking lost, as faeries swarm around her, swinging their partners in dizzying spirals. I wonder if Cardan bothered her before he bothered me.

He takes my wounded hand in his. He’s wearing black gloves, the leather warm even through the silk over my fingers, and a black suit of clothes. Raven feathers cover the upper half of his doublet, and his boots have excessively pointed metal toes that make me conscious of how easy it will be to kick me savagely once we’ve begun dancing. At his brow, he wears a crown of woven metal branches, cocked slightly askew. Dark silver paint streaks over his cheekbones, and black lines run along his lashes. The left one is smeared, as though he forgot about it and wiped his eye.

“What do you want?” I ask him, forcing the words out. I am still thinking about Locke, still reeling from what he said and what he didn’t. “Go ahead. Insult me.”

His eyebrows go up. “I don’t take commands from mortals,” he says with his customary cruel smile.

“So you’re going to say something nice? I don’t think so. Faeries can’t lie.” I want to be angry, but what I feel right now is gratitude. My face is no longer flaming and my eyes aren’t stinging. I am ready to fight, which is far better. Though I am sure it’s the last thing he meant, he did me an enormous favor when he whisked me away from Locke.

His hand slides lower on my hip. I narrow my eyes at him.

“You really hate me, don’t you?” he asks, his smile growing.

“Almost as much as you hate me,” I say, thinking of the page with my name scratched on it. Thinking of the way he looked at me when he was drunk in the hedge maze. The way he’s looking at me now.

He lets go of my hand. “Until we spar again,” he says, making a bow that I cannot help feel is nothing but mockery.

I look after him as he weaves unsteadily through the crowd, not sure what to make of that conversation.

Bells begin to ring, signaling the start of the ceremony. The musicians quiet their fiddles and harps. For a long moment, the hill is silent, listening, and then people move to their places. I push toward the front, where the rest of the Gentry of the High King’s Court are assembling. Where my family will be. Oriana is there already, standing beside one of Madoc’s best knights and looking as though she wishes she could be anywhere else. Oak is off his leash and on Taryn’s shoulders. She is whispering something to a laughing Locke.

I stop moving. The crowd surges around me, but I am rooted to the spot as Taryn leans in and tucks a stray bit of hair behind Locke’s ear.

There is so much in that small gesture. I try to make myself believe it means nothing, but after the strange conversation we had, I can’t. But Taryn has a lover, one who is going to ask for her hand tonight. And she knows that Locke and I are … whatever we are.

Do you love me enough to give me up? Isn’t that a test of love?

Vivienne has come out of the crowd, cat eyes agleam, hair loose around her face. She takes Oak in her arms and swings him around and around until they both fall in a whoosh of Vivi’s skirts. I should go over, but I don’t.

I can’t face Taryn yet, not when I cannot get such a disloyal thought out of my head.

Instead, I hang back, watching the royal family assemble on the dais. The High King is seated on his throne of woven branches, wearing the heavy circlet, looking out from his deeply lined face with alert bronze eyes, like those of an owl. Prince Dain sits on a humble wooden stool beside him, dressed in all-white robes, his feet and hands bare. And behind the throne

stands the rest of the royal family—Balekin and Elowyn, Rhyia and Caelia. Even Taniot, Prince Dain's mother, is present, in a garment of shining gold. The only family member missing is Cardan.

The High King Eldred stands, and the entire hill goes quiet. "Long has been my rule, but today I take my leave of you." His voice echoes through the hill. Rarely has he ever spoken this way, to a great assemblage of us, and I am struck both by the power of his voice and the frailness of his person. "When first I felt the call to search out the Land of Promise, I believed it would pass. But I can resist it no longer. Today, I will be king no more, but wanderer."

Although everyone here must know this was what we've gathered for, still there are cries from all around me. A sprite begins to weep into the hair of a goat-headed phooka.

The Court Poet and Seneschal, Val Moren, steps from the side of the dais. He is stooped, spindly, his long hair full of sticks, with a scald crow perched on one shoulder. He leans heavily on a staff of smooth wood that has begun to bud at the very top, as though it were still alive. He is rumored to have been lured away from the mortal lands to Eldred's bed in his youth. I wonder what he will do now, without his king.

"We are loath to let you go, my lord," he says, and the words seem to take on a special, bittersweet resonance coming from his mouth.

Eldred cups his hands, and the branches of the throne shudder and begin to grow, sending up new green shoots to spiral into the air, leaves unfurling and flower buds bursting along the length of them. The roots of the ceiling begin to worm, lengthening like vines and crawling across the underside of the hill. There is a scent in the air, like a summer breeze, heavy with the promise of apples. "Another will stand in my place. I ask of you, release me."

The assembled Folk speak as one, surprising me. "*We release you*," they say, words echoing around me.

The High King lets his heavy robe of state fall from his shoulders. It crumples on the stone in a jewel-encrusted pile. He takes the oak-leaf crown from his own head. Already, he stands up straighter. There is an unnerving eagerness in him. Eldred has been the High King of Elfhame longer than the memories of many of the Folk; he has always seemed ancient to me, but the years seem to fall from him along with the mantle of rule.

“Whom will you put in your stead, to be our High King?” Val Moren asks.

“My third-born, my son Dain,” says Eldred. “Come forward, child.”

Prince Dain rises from his humble place on the stool. His mother removes the white cloth covering him, leaving him naked. I blink once. I am used to a certain amount of nakedness in Faerie, but not among the royal family. Standing next to the rest of them in their heavy brocade and embroidered magnificence, he looks exquisitely vulnerable.

I wonder if he’s cold. I think of my hurt hand and hope so.

“Will you accept?” Val Moren asks. The scald crow on his shoulder lifts black-tipped wings and beats the air. I am not sure if that’s supposed to be part of the ceremony.

“I will assume the burden and the honor of the crown,” Dain says gravely, and in that moment, his nakedness becomes something else, some sign of power. “I will have it.”

“Unseelie Court, night host, come forward and anoint your prince,” Val Moren says.

A boggan makes her hulking way to the raised dais. Her body is covered in thick golden hair, her arms long enough to drag on the ground if she didn’t bend them. She looks strong enough to break Prince Dain in half. Around her waist she wears a skirt of patchwork furs, and in one massive hand she carries what looks like an inkpot.

She paints his left arm with long spirals of clotting blood, paints it over his stomach, down his left leg. He does not flinch. When she is done, she steps back to admire her grisly handiwork and then gives a shallow bow to Eldred.

“Seelie Court, twilight folk, come forward and anoint your prince,” Val Moren says.

A diminutive boy in a wrapper of what looks like birch bark, his wild hair sticking up at odd angles, walks to the dais. Small pale green wings sit on his back. When he anoints Dain’s other side, he paints it in thick swaths of pollen, yellow as butter.

“Wild fey, Shy Folk, come forward and anoint your prince,” says Val Moren.

It is a hob who comes forward this time, in a dapper little suit, carefully sewn. He carries with him a handful of mud, which he smears over the

center of Prince Dain’s chest, just above his heart.

I finally spot Cardan in the crowd, unsteady on his feet and with a wineskin in one hand. He appears to have gotten himself riotously drunk. When I think of the smear of silver paint on his face and the way his hand had slid on my hip, I guess he was well on his way there when I saw him. I feel an immense, mean satisfaction that he is not standing with the royal family at the most important moment for the Court in centuries.

He’s going to be in so much trouble.

“Who will clothe him?” Val Moren asks, and in turn, each of his sisters and then his mother bring him a white tunic and pants made from hide, a collar of gold, and high kidskin boots. He looks like a storybook king, one who will have a wise and just rule. I imagine the Ghost in the rafters, and the Roach in his mask, watching proudly. I feel some of that same pride, being sworn to him.

But I cannot forget his words to me: *You are my creature, Jude Duarte.*

I touch my wounded hand to the hilt of my silver sword, the sword my father forged. After tonight, I will be the High King’s spy and a true member of his Court. I will lie to his enemies and, if that doesn’t work, I will find a way to do something worse. And if he crosses me, well, then I will find a way around that, too.

Val Moren brings the end of his staff down hard against the ground, and I feel the reverberation to my teeth. “And who will crown him?”

Eldred wears an expression of pride. The crown gleams in his gnarled hands, glowing as if sunlight emanated from the metal itself. “I will.”

The guards are changing configuration subtly, perhaps preparing to escort Eldred out of the palace. There are more knights at the edges of the crowd than there were when the coronation ceremony began.

The High King speaks. “Come, Dain. Kneel before me.”

The Crown Prince bends down in front of his father and the assemblage.

My gaze cuts to Taryn, who is still standing with Locke. Oriana has a protective arm around Oak, one of Madoc’s lieutenants bending to speak with her. He gestures toward a doorway, and she says something to Vivi and then starts toward it. Taryn and Locke follow. I grit my teeth and start to push my way through the crowd to them. I don’t want to disgrace myself like Cardan, by not being where I’m supposed to be.

Val Moren's voice cuts through my thoughts. "And will you, the Folk of Elfhame, accept Prince Dain as your High King?"

The cry rose up from the crowd, in chirping voices and bellows: "We will."

My gaze goes to the knights surrounding the dais. In another life, I would have been one of them. But as my eyes rest there, I notice familiar faces. Madoc's best commanders. Warriors who are fiercely loyal.

They are not dressed in their uniforms. Over shining armor, they wear the Greenbriar livery. Perhaps Madoc is only being careful, only putting his best people in place. But the spy I killed, the one with the taunting message, was Madoc's as well.

And Oriana, Oak, and my sisters are gone. Escorted out of the hill by one of Madoc's lieutenants just as the dais became more heavily guarded.

I have a plan to ensure our futures.

I need to find the Roach. I need to find the Ghost. I need to tell them that something's wrong.

A well-seasoned strategist waits for the right opportunity.

I push past a trio of goblins and a troll and one of the Still Folk. A spriggan growls at me, but I don't pay any mind. The end of the coronation is in sight. I see goblets and tankards being refilled.

Up on the dais, Balekin has left his place with the other princes and princesses. For a moment, I think it's part of the ceremony—until he draws a long, thin blade, one I recognize from his horrible duel with Cardan. I stop moving.

"Brother," Prince Dain admonishes.

"I will not accept you," Balekin says. "I have come to challenge you for the crown." All around the dais, I see knights unsheathing blades. But neither Elowyn nor Eldred, nor any of the rest of them—not Val Moren nor Taniot nor Rhyia—is equipped. Only Caelia pulls out a knife from her bodice, the blade too small to be of much use.

I want to draw my own sword, but everyone is pressed in too tightly.

"Balekin," Eldred says sternly. "Child. The High Court cannot be like the lower Courts. We have no blood inheritance. No duel with your brother will induce me to place a crown on your unworthy head. Content yourself with my choice. Do not humiliate yourself before all of Faerie."

“This ought only be between us,” Balekin says to Dain, not acknowledging that his father had even spoken. “There is no High Monarch now. There is no one but us and a crown.”

“I need not fight you,” Dain says, gesturing out toward the knights grouped thickly around the dais, waiting for an order. Madoc is among them, but I am not close enough to see more than that. “And you are not worthy of even that much regard.”

“Then have this on your conscience.” Balekin walks two steps and thrusts out his arm. He doesn’t even look in the direction he’s thrusting, but his blade pierces Elowyn’s throat. Someone shrieks, then everyone does. For a moment, the wound is just a blotch against her skin, and then blood pours out, a river of red. She staggers forward, going to her hands and knees. Gold fabric and glittering gems are drowning in scarlet.

It was a mere flick of Balekin’s blade, an almost nonchalant gesture.

Eldred’s hand comes up. I think he means to conjure up the same magic that made the roots grow, made the branches of the throne bloom and twine. But that power is gone; he gave it up with his kingdom. Instead, the newly budded flowers of the throne brown and wither.

The crow on Val Moren’s shoulder takes to wing, cawing as it flies toward the roots hanging down from the hollow roof of the hill.

“*Guards*,” Dain says, in a voice that expects to be obeyed. None of the knights advance toward the dais, though. As one, they turn so their backs are to the royal family and their swords to the assemblage. They’re allowing this to happen, allowing Balekin to stage his coup.

But I cannot believe that this is Madoc’s plan. Dain is his friend. Dain campaigned with him. Dain is going to reward him once he’s the High King.

The crowd surges, carrying me with it. Everyone is moving, pushing forward or away from the gruesome tableau. I see the salt-haired king of the Court of Termites try to wade toward the fight, but his own knights get in front of him, holding him back. My family is gone. I look around for Cardan, but he is lost in the crowd.

It is all happening so fast. Caelia has run to the High King’s side. She has her small knife, barely long enough to be a weapon, but she holds it bravely. Taniot crouches over Elowyn’s body, trying to stem the tide of blood with the skirts of her dress.

“What do you say now, Father?” Balekin demands. “Brother?”

Two bolts fly from the shadows, thudding into Balekin’s side. He staggers forward. The cloth of his doublet appears ripped, a gleam of metal underneath. Armor. I scan the rafters for the Ghost.

I am an agent of the prince as surely as he is. It’s my duty to get to Dain. I shove forward again. In my head I can see a vision of the future, like a story I am telling myself, a clear, shining narrative to contrast with the chaos around me. Somehow, I will get to the prince and defend him against Balekin’s treachery until the loyal members of his guard reach us. I will be the hero, the one who put herself between the traitors and her king.

Madoc gets there before I do.

For a brief moment, I am relieved. His commanders’ loyalty might be bought, but Madoc would never—

Then Madoc thrusts his sword through Dain’s chest with such force that the blade emerges on the other side. He drags it up, through his rib cage, to his heart.

I stop moving and let the crowd flow around me. I am still as stone.

I see a flash of white bone, of wet red muscle. Prince Dain, who was almost the High King, falls on top of the gem-crusted red cloak of state, his spilling blood lost in the jumble of jewels.

“Traitors,” Eldred whispers, but his voice is amplified by the space. The word feels as though it rings through the hall.

Madoc pauses and then sets his jaw, as though he is doing some grim duty. He is wearing his red cap now, the one I saw sticking out of his pocket, the one I have studied in its case. Tonight he will freshen it. There will be new tide lines. But I cannot believe he is doing this on anyone’s orders.

He must have allied with Balekin, misdirected Dain’s spies. Put his own commanders in place, to keep the royal family isolated from anyone who would help them. Urged Balekin to orchestrate a strike at the one time no one would expect it. Even figured out that the only way not to trigger the crown’s death curse was to move when it rested on no one’s head. Knowing him as I do, I am sure he planned this coup.

Madoc has betrayed Eldred, and Dain is gone, taking all my hopes and plans with him.

Coronations are a time when many things are possible.

Balekin looks insufferably satisfied with himself. “Give me the crown.”

Eldred drops the circlet from his hand. It rolls a little ways across the floor. “Take it yourself if it’s what you so desire.”

Caelia is making a terrible keening sound. Rhyia stares at the crowd in horror. Val Moren stands beside Eldred, his narrow poet’s face pale. With the knights circling it, the dais is like a terrible stage, where all the players are doomed to run through their roles to the same bloody end.

Madoc’s hands are gloved in red. I cannot stop staring at them.

Balekin lifts the High Crown. The golden oak leaves glitter with the light of candle flame. “You waited too long to depart the throne, Father. You have become weak. You let traitors rule little fiefdoms, the power of the low Courts goes unchecked, and the wild fey do as they like. Dain would have been the same, a coward who hid behind intrigues. But I am not afraid of bloodshed.”

Eldred does not speak. He makes no move toward the crown or toward a weapon. He simply waits.

Balekin orders a knight to bring him Taniot. A female redcap in armor steps onto the dais to grab the struggling consort. Taniot’s head lashes back and forth, her long black horns cutting into the redcap knight’s shoulder. It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. There are too many knights. Two more step forward, and there is no more struggling.

Balekin draws himself up before his father. “Declare me the High King, put the crown on my head, and you may go from this place, free and unharmed. My sisters will be protected. Your consort will live. Otherwise, I will kill Taniot. I will kill her here in front of everyone, and they will all know that you allowed it.”

My gaze goes to Madoc, but he is on the steps, speaking in low tones to one of his commanders, a troll who has eaten at our table, has teased Oak and made him laugh. I laughed, too, then. Now my hands are shaking, my whole body trembling.

“Balekin, firstborn, no matter whose blood you spill, you will never rule Elfhame,” Eldred says. “You are unworthy of the crown.”

I close my eyes and think of Oriana’s words to me: *It is no easy thing to be the lover of the High King. It is to always be a pawn.*

Taniot goes to her death with grace. She is still. Her bearing is regal and doomed, as though she has already passed into the realm of ballads. Her

fingers are laced together. She makes no sound as one of the knights—the redcap knight with the slashed shoulder—beheads her with a single swift and brutal strike of her blade. Taniot's horned head rolls a short ways until it hits Dain's corpse.

I feel something wet on my face, like rain.

There are plenty of the Folk who delight in murder and plenty more who delight in spectacle. A kind of giddy madness seems to come upon the crowd, a kind of hunger for even greater slaughter. I fear they may have a surfeit of satisfaction. Two of the knights have seized Eldred.

"I will not ask you again," Balekin says.

But Eldred only laughs. He keeps laughing when Balekin runs him through. He doesn't fall like the others. Instead of blood pouring from his wound, red moths stream out, into the air. They rush out of him so quickly that in a moment, the High King's body is gone and there are just those red moths, swirling up into the air in a vast cloud, a tornado of soft wings.

But whatever magic made them does not last. They begin to fall until they are scattered across the dais like blown leaves. The High King Eldred is, impossibly, dead.

The dais is strewn with bodies and blood. Val Moren is on his knees.

"Sisters," Balekin says, striding toward them. Some of the arrogance is gone from his voice, replaced with a horrible softness. He sounds like a man in the midst of a terrible dream from which he refuses to wake. "Which of you will crown me? Crown me and live."

I think of Madoc telling my mother not to run.

Caelia steps forward, dropping her knife. She is dressed in a stomacher of gold and a skirt of blue, a circlet of berries in her loose hair.

"I will do it," she says. "It is enough. I will make you the High King, although the stain of what you have done will forever taint your rule."

Never is like forever, I think, and then am angry to be reminded of anything Cardan has ever said, especially now. There's a part of me that is glad she has given in, despite the awfulness of Balekin, the inevitable horror of his rule. At least this is over.

A bolt comes from the shadows of the rafters—in a completely different trajectory than the last. It strikes her in the chest. Her eyes go wide, her hands flutter over her heart, as though the wound is immodest and she needs to cover it. Then her eyes roll back, and she goes down without a

sigh. It is Balekin who cries out with frustration. Madoc gives orders to his men, pointing toward the ceiling. A phalanx breaks off from the others and rushes up the stairs. A few guards fly up into the air on pale green wings, blades drawn.

He killed her. The Ghost killed her.

I push my way blindly toward the dais, past a sluagh howling for more blood. I don't know what I think I am going to do when I get there.

Rhyia picks up her sister's knife, holds it in one shaking hand. Her blue dress makes her look like a bird, caught before she could take flight. She's Vivi's only real friend in Faerie.

"Are you really going to fight me, sister?" Balekin says. "You have neither sword nor armor. Come, it is too late for that."

"It is too late," she says, and brings the knife to her own throat, pressing the point just below her ear.

"No!" I shout, although my voice is drowned out by the crowd, drowned out by Balekin shouting, too. And then, because I can't stand to see any more death, I close my eyes. I keep them closed through being jostled by something heavy and furred. Balekin starts calling for someone to find Cardan, to bring him Cardan, and my eyes automatically fly open. But there's no Cardan in sight. Only Rhyia's crumpled body and more horror.

Winged archers take aim at the cluster of roots where the Ghost was hiding. A moment later, he drops down into the crowd. I hold my breath, afraid he has been hit. But he rolls, stands, and takes off up the stairs, with guards hot on his heels.

He has no chance. There are too many of them, and the brugh is too packed, leaving nowhere to run. I want to help him, want to go to him, but I am hemmed in. I can do nothing. I can save no one.

Balekin turns on the Court Poet, pointing at him. "You will crown me. Speak the words of the ceremony."

"I cannot," Val Moren says. "I am no kin to you, no kin to the crown."

"You will," Balekin says.

"Yes, my liege," the Court Poet answers in a quavering voice. He stumbles through a quick version of the coronation as the hill goes silent. But when the crowd is asked to accept Balekin as the new High King, no one speaks. The golden oak-leaf crown is in Balekin's hand, but not yet on his head.

Balekin's gaze sweeps over the audience, and though I know it will not settle on me, I still flinch. His voice booms. "Pledge yourselves to me."

We do not. The monarchs do not bend their knees. The Gentry are silent. The wild faeries watch and measure. I see Queen Annet of the southmost Unseelie Court, the Court of Moths, signal to her courtiers to leave the hall. She turns away with a sneer.

"You are sworn to the High King," Balekin booms. "And I am king now." Balekin lifts the crown and sets it on his own head. But a moment later, he howls, knocking it off. A burn is on his brow, the red shadow of a circlet.

"We do not swear to the king, but to the crown," someone cries. It is Lord Roiben of the Court of Termites. He has made his way to stand in front of the knights. And although there are more than a dozen directly between him and Balekin, Roiben does not seem particularly concerned. "You have three days to get it onto your head, kin slayer. Three days before I will depart here, unsworn, unchecked in power, and unimpressed. And I am certain not to be the only one."

There is a smattering of laughter and whispers as his words spread. A motley group still fills the hall: glittering Seelie and terrifying Unseelie; the wild fey that seldom leave their hills, rivers, or grave mounds; goblins and hags; pixies and phookas. They have watched nearly all the royal family be slaughtered in a single night. I wonder how much more violence will spring up if there is no new monarch to caution them. I wonder who would welcome it.

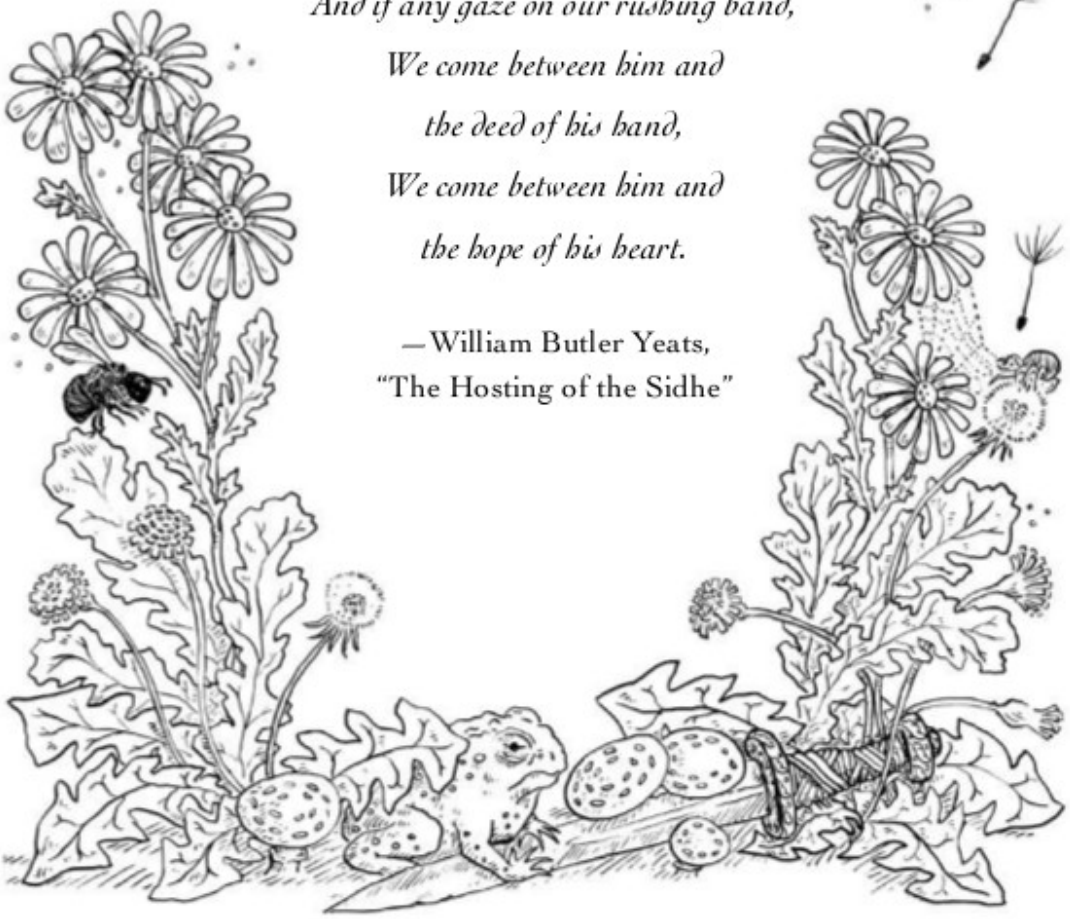
Sprites glitter in air that stinks of freshly spilled blood. The revel will go on, I realize. Everything will go on.

But I am not sure that I can.

Book Two

Empty your heart of its mortal dream.
The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,
Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,
Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are a-gleam,
Our arms are waving, our lips are apart;
And if any gaze on our rushing band,
We come between him and
the deed of his hand,
We come between him and
the hope of his heart.

—William Butler Yeats,
"The Hosting of the Sidhe"



I am a child again, hiding under a table, with the revel spinning around above me.

Pressing my hand to my heart, I feel the speeding thud of it. I cannot think. I cannot think. I cannot think.

There is blood on my dress, little dots of it sinking into the blue sky.

I thought I could not be shocked by death, but—there was just so *much* of it. An embarrassing, ridiculous excess. My mind keeps going back over Prince Dain's white ribs, the spray of blood from Elowyn's throat, and the High King's denying Balekin over and over as he died. Over poor Taniot and Caelia and Rhyia, who were forced to discover, each in turn, how the crown of Faerie mattered more than their lives.

I think of Madoc, who had been at Dain's right hand all these years. Faeries might not be able to lie outright, but Madoc had lied with every laugh, every clap on the back, every shared cup of wine. Madoc, who'd let us all get dressed up and given me a beautiful sword to wear tonight, as though we were really going to some fun party.

I knew what he was, I try to tell myself. *I saw the blood crusted on his red cap. If I let myself forget, then more fool me.*

At least knights had led my family away before the killing started. At least none of the others had to watch, although, unless they were very far

away, they could not have failed to hear the screams. At least Oak would not grow up as I have, with death as my birthright.

I sit there until my heart slows again. I need to get out of the hill. This revel is going to turn wilder, and with no new High Monarch on the throne, there is little holding any of the revelers back from any entertainment they can devise. It's probably not the best time to be a mortal here.

I try to remember looking down on the layout of the throne room from above with the Ghost. I try to recall the entrances into the main part of the castle.

If I could find one of the guards and make them believe that I was part of Madoc's household, they might take me to the rest of my family. But I don't want to go. I don't want to see Madoc, covered in blood, sitting beside Balekin. I don't want to pretend that what happened is anything other than horrific. I don't want to disguise my disgust.

There's another way out. I can crawl under the tables to the steps and go up them to the ledge near Madoc's strategy room. I think from there I can climb directly through and be in the part of the castle most likely to be deserted—and the part with access to secret tunnels. From there, I can get out without worrying about knights or guards or anyone else. Adrenaline makes my whole body sing with the desire to move, but although what I have feels like a plan, it's not one yet. I can get out of the palace, but I have nowhere to go after that.

Figure it out later, instinct urges.

Okay, half a plan is good enough.

On my hands and knees, heedless of my dress, heedless of the way the sheath of my sword drags against the packed-earth floor, heedless of the pain in my hand, I crawl. Above me I hear music. I hear other things, too—the snap of what might be bones, a whimper, a howl. I ignore all of it.

Then the tablecloth lifts, and as my eyes adjust to the brightness of the candlelight, a masked figure grabs for my arm. There's no easy way to draw my sword, crouched as I am under a table, so I grab for the knife inside my bodice. I am about to strike when I recognize those ridiculous spike-tipped shoes.

Cardan. The only one who can legitimately crown Balekin. The only other descendant of the Greenbriar line left. Everyone in Faerie must be looking for him, and here he is, wandering around in a flimsy silver fox half

mask, blinking at me with drunken confusion and swaying a bit on his feet. I almost laugh outright. Imagine my luck to be the one to find him.

"You're mortal," he informs me. In his other hand, he's carrying an empty goblet, tipped over absently, as though he's forgotten he still carries it. "It's not safe for you here. Especially if you go around stabbing everyone."

"Not safe for *me*?" Absurdity of the statement aside, I have no idea why he's acting as though he's ever thought about my safety for a moment, except to endanger it. I try to remind myself he must be in shock and grieving, and that might make him behave strangely, but it's hard to think of him as a person who could care about anyone enough to mourn. Right now, he doesn't even seem to care about himself. "Get down here before you're recognized."

"Playing hide-and-seek under the table? Crouching in the dirt? Typical of your kind, but far beneath my dignity." He laughs unsteadily, like he expects I am going to laugh, too.

I don't. I ball up my fist and punch him in the stomach, right where I know it will hurt. He staggers to his knees. The goblet drops to the dirt, making a hollow clanking sound. "Ow!" he shouts, and lets me tug him under the table.

"We'll get out of here without anyone noticing," I tell him. "We stay under the tables and make our way to the steps to the upper levels of the palace. And don't tell me it's beneath your dignity to crawl. You're so drunk you can barely stand anyway."

I hear him snort. "If you insist," he says. It's too dark to see his expression, and even if it wasn't, he's masked.

We make our way through the underside of the tables, with ballads and drinking songs sung above us, screams and whispers in the air, and the soft footfalls of dancers echoing around us like rain. My heart is hammering from the bloodshed, from Cardan being so close, from striking him without consequences. I concentrate on him shuffling behind me. Everything smells of packed earth, spilled wine, and blood. I can feel my thoughts spiraling away, can feel myself start to tremble. I bite the inside of my lip to give myself a fresh pain to focus on.

I must keep it together. I can't lose it now, not where Cardan will see.

And not when a plan is starting to form in my mind. A plan requiring this last prince.

I glance back and see that he has stopped moving. He's sitting on the ground, looking at his hand. Looking at his ring. "He despised me." His voice sounds light, conversational. Like he's forgotten where he is.

"Balekin?" I ask, thinking of what I saw at Hollow Hall.

"My father." Cardan snorts. "I didn't much know the others, my brothers and sisters. Isn't that funny? Prince Dain—he didn't want me in the palace, so he forced me out."

I wait, not sure what to say. It's disturbing to see him like this, behaving as though he might have emotions.

After a moment, he seems to come back to himself. His eyes focus on me, glittering in the dark. "And now they're all dead. Thanks to Madoc. Our honorable general. They never should have trusted him. But your mother discovered that a long time ago, didn't she?"

I narrow my eyes. "Crawl."

The corner of his mouth lifts. "You first."

We go from table to table, until finally we're as close as we're likely to get to the steps. Cardan pushes back the tablecloth and reaches out his hand toward me, in the gallant manner of someone helping up the person they've been trysting with. Maybe Cardan would say he was doing it for the benefit of onlookers, but we both know he's mocking me. I stand without touching him.

The only thing that matters is getting out of the hall before the revel gets bloodier, before the wrong creature decides I am an amusing plaything, before Cardan is gutted by someone who doesn't want any High Monarch in power.

I start toward the steps, but he stops me. "Not like that. Your father's knights will recognize you."

"I'm not the one they're looking for," I remind him.

He frowns, although his mask hides most of it. Still, I can see it in the turn of his mouth. "If they see your face, they may pay too much attention to whom you're with."

Annoyingly, he's right. "If they knew me at all, they'd know I'd never be with you." Which is ridiculous, since I am currently standing beside him,

although it makes me feel better to say it. With a sigh, I take down my braids, rubbing my hands through my hair until it hangs wild in my face.

"You look …" he says, and then trails off, blinking a few times, not seeming able to finish. I am guessing the hair thing worked better than he had expected.

"Give me a second," I say, and I plunge into the crowd. I don't like risking this, but covering my face is safer than not. I spot a nixie in a black velvet mask eating a tiny sparrow's heart off a long pin. Slyfooting up behind her, I cut the ribbons and catch the mask before it hits the floor. She turns, searching for where it fell, but I am already away. Soon she will abandon looking and eat another delicacy—or at least I hope she will. It is just a mask, after all.

When I return, Cardan is swilling down more wine, his gaze burning into me. I have no idea what he sees, what he's even looking for. A thin rivulet of green liquid pours over his cheek. He reaches for the heavy silver pitcher as if to pour himself another cup.

"Come on," I say, grabbing for his gloved hand with mine.

We're to the steps out of the hall when three knights move to block our way. "Look elsewhere for your pleasure," one informs us. "This is the way to the palace, and it is barred to common Folk."

I feel Cardan stiffen beside me, because he's an idiot and cares more about being called common than anyone's safety, sadly even his own. I tug his arm. "We will do as we are bid," I assure the knight, trying to move Cardan away before he does something we will both regret.

Cardan, however, will not be moved. "You are much mistaken in us."

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.

"The High King Balekin is a friend to my lady's Court," Cardan says, silver-tongued in his silver fox mask. He wears an easy half smile. He's speaking the language of privilege, speaking it with his drawling tone, with the looseness of his limbs, as though he thinks he owns everything he can see. Even drunk, he's convincing. "You may have heard of Queen Gliten in the Northwest. Balekin sent a message about the missing prince. He is waiting for an answer."

"I don't suppose you have any proof of that?" one of the knights asks.

"Of course." Cardan holds out a fisted hand and opens it to reveal a royal ring gleaming in the center of his palm. I have no idea when he took it off

his finger, a neat bit of sleight of hand that I had no idea he could do, no less while inebriated. “I was given this token so you would know me.”

At the sight of the ring, they step back.

With an obnoxious, too-charming smile, Cardan grabs my arm and hauls me past them. Although I have to grit my teeth, I let him. We’re on the steps, and it’s because of him.

“What about the mortal?” one of the guards calls. Cardan turns.

“Oh, well, you aren’t *entirely* mistaken in me. I intended to keep some of the delights of the revel for myself,” he says, and they all smirk.

It is all I can do not to knock him to the ground, but there’s no dispute he’s clever with words. According to the baroque rules that govern fey tongues, everything he said was true enough, so long as you concentrate only on the words. Balekin is Madoc’s friend, and I am part of Madoc’s Court, if you squint a little. So I am the “lady.” And the knights probably *have* heard of Queen Gliten; she’s famous enough. I’m sure Balekin *is* waiting for an answer about the missing prince. He’s probably desperate for one. And no one can claim that Cardan’s ring isn’t meant to be a token by which he’s known.

As for what he wants to keep from the revel, it could be anything.

Cardan is clever, but it’s not a nice kind of cleverness. And it’s a little too close to my own propensity for lying to be comfortable. Still, we’re free. Behind us, what should have been a celebration of a new High King continues: the shrieking, the feasting, the whirling around in endless looping dances. I glance back once as we climb, taking in the sea of bodies and wings, inkdrop eyes and sharp teeth.

I shudder.

We climb the steps together. I let him keep his possessive grip on my arm, guiding me. I let him open the doors with his own keys. I let him do whatever he wants. And then, once we’re in the empty hall in the upper level of the palace, I turn and press the point of my knife directly underneath his chin.

“Jude?” he asks, up against the wall, pronouncing my name carefully, as though to avoid slurring. I am not sure I have ever heard him use my actual name before.

“Surprised?” I ask, a fierce grin starting on my face. The most important boy in Faerie and my enemy, finally in my power. It feels even better than I

thought it would. “You shouldn’t be.”

I press the tip of the knife against his skin so he can feel the bite. His black eyes focus on me with new intensity. “Why?” he asks. Just that.

Seldom have I felt such a rush of triumph. I have to concentrate on keeping it from going to my head, stronger than wine. “Because your luck is terrible and mine is great. Do what I say and I’ll delay the pleasure of hurting you.”

“Planning to spill a little more royal blood tonight?” He sneers, moving as if to shrug off the knife. I move with him, keeping it against his throat. He keeps talking. “Feeling left out of the slaughter?”

“You’re drunk,” I say.

“Oh, indeed.” He leans his head back against the stone, closing his eyes. Nearby torchlight turns his black hair to bronze. “But do you really believe I am going to let you parade me in front of the general, as though I am some lowly—”

I press the knife harder. He sucks in a breath and bites off the end of that sentence. “Of course,” he says, a moment later, with a laugh full of self-mockery. “I was passed out cold while my family was murdered; it’s hard to fall more lowly than that.”

“Stop talking,” I tell him, pushing aside any twinge of sympathy. He never had any for me. “Move.”

“Or what?” he asks, still not opening his eyes. “You’re not really going to stab me.”

“When was the last time you saw your dear friend Valerian?” I whisper. “Not today, despite the insult implied by his absence. Did you wonder at that?”

His eyes open. He looks as though I slapped him awake. “I did. Where is he?”

“Rotting near Madoc’s stables. I killed him, and then I buried him. So believe me when I threaten you. No matter how unlikely it seems, you are the most important person in all of Faerie. Whosoever has you, has power. And I want power.”

“I suppose you were right after all.” He studies my face, giving nothing away on his own. “I suppose I didn’t know the least of what you could do.”

I try not to let him know how much his calmness rattles me. It makes me feel as though the knife in my hand, which should lend me authority, isn’t enough. It makes me want to hurt him just to convince myself he can be frightened. He’s just lost his whole family; I shouldn’t be thinking like this.

But I can’t help thinking that he will exploit any pity on my part, any weakness.

“Time to move,” I say harshly. “Go to the first door and open it. When we’re inside, we’re going to the closet. There’s a passageway through there.”

“Yes, fine,” he says, annoyed, trying to push my blade away.

I hold it steady, so that the knife cuts into his skin. He swears and puts a bleeding finger in his mouth. “What was that for?”

“For fun,” I say, and then ease the blade from his throat, slowly and deliberately. My lip curls, but otherwise I keep my expression as masklike as I know how, as cruel and cold as the face that reoccurs in my nightmares. It is only as I do it that I realize who I am aping, whose face frightened me into wanting it for my own.

His.

My heart is hammering so hard I feel sick.

“Will you at least tell me where we’re going?” he asks as I shove him ahead of me with my free hand.

“No. Now move.” The growl in my voice is all mine.

Unbelievably, he does, swaying as he makes his way down the hall and then into the study I indicate. When we get to the hidden passageway, he crawls in with only a single inscrutable glance back at me. Maybe he’s even drunker than I thought.

It doesn’t matter. He’ll sober up soon enough.

The first thing I do when I get to the nest of the Court of Shadows is tie Prince Cardan to a chair with shredded pieces of my own dirty dress. Then I remove both of our masks. He lets me do it all, an odd look on his face. No one else is there, and I have no idea when anyone might come back, if they will at all.

It doesn’t matter. I can manage without them.

I have made it this far, after all. When Cardan found me, I knew that having control of him was the only path to having some control over the fate of my world.

I think of all the vows I made to Dain, including the one I never spoke out loud: *Instead of being afraid, I will become something to fear.* If Dain isn’t going to give me power, then I am going to take it for myself.

Not having spent much time in the Court of Shadows, I don’t know its secrets. I walk through rooms, opening heavy wooden doors, opening cabinets, taking inventory of my supplies. I discover a pantry that is as full of poisons as it is of cheeses and sausages; a training room with sawdust on the floor, weapons on the wall, and a new wooden dummy in the center, its face crudely painted with a disturbing grin. I go into the back room with four pallets on the ground and a few mugs and discarded clothing spread out near them. I touch none of it, until I come to the map room with a desk. Dain’s desk, stuffed with scrolls and pens and sealing wax.

For a moment, I am overwhelmed by the enormity of what has happened. Prince Dain is gone, gone forever. And his father and sisters are gone with him.

I go back to the main room and drag Cardan and the chair into Dain’s office, propping it against the open door so I can keep an eye on him. I take down a handheld crossbow from the wall in the training room, along with a

few bolts. Weapon beside me, cocked and ready, I sit down in Dain's chair and rest my head in my hands.

"Will you tell me where exactly we are, now that I am trussed up to your satisfaction?" I want to strike Cardan over and over until I slap that smugness off his face. But if I did, he'd know just how much he scares me.

"This is where Prince Dain's spies meet," I inform him, trying to shake off my fear. I need to concentrate. Cardan is nothing, an instrument, a gambling marker.

He fixes me with an odd, startled look. "How do you know that? What possessed you to bring me here?"

"I'm trying to figure out what to do next," I say with uncomfortable honesty.

"And if one of the spies returns?" he asks me, rousing from his stupor enough to actually seem concerned. "They're going to discover you in their lair and …"

He trails off at the smirk on my face and subsides into stunned silence. I can see the moment he arrives at the realization that I'm one of them. That I belong here.

Cardan lapses back into silence.

Finally. Finally, I've made him flinch.

I do something I would never dare to do before. I go through Prince Dain's desk. There are mounds of correspondence. Lists. Notes neither to Dain nor from him, probably stolen. More in his hand—movements, riddles, proposals for laws. Formal invitations. Informal and innocuous letters, including a few from Madoc. I am not sure what I am looking for. I am just scanning everything as quickly as I can for something, anything, that might give me some idea of why he was betrayed.

All my life, I grew up thinking of the High King and Prince Dain as our unquestioned rulers. I believed Madoc to be entirely loyal to them; I was loyal, too. I knew Madoc was bloodthirsty. I guess I knew he wanted more conquest, more war, more battle. But I thought he considered wanting war to be part of his role as the general, while part of the High King's role was to keep him in check. Madoc talked about honor, about obligation, about duty. He'd raised Taryn and me in the name of those things; it seemed logical he was willing to put up with other unpleasantness.

I didn't think Madoc even *liked* Balekin.

I recall the dead messenger, shot by me, and the note in the scroll: KILL THE BEARER OF THIS MESSAGE. It was a piece of misdirection, all meant to keep Dain's spies busy chasing our tails while Balekin and Madoc planned to strike in the one place no one looked—right out in the open.

"Did you know?" I ask Cardan. "Did you know what Balekin was going to do? Is that why you weren't with the rest of your family?"

He barks out a laugh. "If you think that, why do you suppose I didn't run straight into Balekin's loving arms?"

"Tell me anyway," I say.

"I didn't know," he says. "Did you? Madoc is your father, after all."

I take out a long bar of wax from Dain's desk, one end blackened. "What does it matter what I say? I could lie."

"Tell me anyway," he says, and yawns.

I really want to slap him.

"I didn't know, either," I admit, not looking at him. Instead, I am staring at the pile of notes, at the soft wax impressions, an intaglio in reverse. "And I should have."

My gaze cuts toward Cardan. I walk over to him, squat down, and begin to prize off his royal ring. He tries to pull his hand out of my grasp, but he's tied in such a way that he can't. I yank it off his finger.

I hate how I feel around him, the irrational panic when I touch his skin.

"I'm just borrowing your stupid ring," I say. The signet fits perfectly into the impression on the letter. All the rings of all the princes and princesses must be identical. That means a seal from one looks much like the seal of another. I pull out a fresh piece of paper and begin to write.

"I don't suppose you have anything to drink around here?" Cardan asks. "I don't imagine that whatever happens next is going to be particularly comfortable for me, and I would like to stay drunk in order to face it."

"Do you really think I care if you're comfortable?" I demand.

I hear a footfall and stand up from the desk. From the common room comes the sound of smashing glass. I shove Cardan's ring into my bodice, where it rests heavily against my skin, and head into the hall. The Roach has knocked a line of jars off the bookshelf and cracked the wood of a cabinet. Jagged glass and spilled infusions carpet the stone floor. Mandrake. Snakeroot. Larkspur. The Ghost is grabbing the Roach's arm, hauling him

back from smashing more things. Despite the line of blood streaking down his leg, the stiffness of his movements. The Ghost has been in a fight.

“Hey,” I say.

Both look surprised to see me. They are even more surprised when they notice Prince Cardan tied to a chair in the doorway of the map room.

“Shouldn’t you be with your father, celebrating?” the Ghost spits. I take a step back. Before, he’s always been a model of perfect, unnatural calm. Neither of them seems calm now. “The Bomb is still out there, and both of them nearly gave their lives to free me from Balekin’s dungeon, only to find you here, gloating.”

“No!” I say, holding my ground. “Think about it. If I knew what was going to happen, if I was on Madoc’s side, the only way I would be here is with a retainer of knights. You’d have been shot coming in the door. I would hardly have come alone, dragging along a prisoner that my father would dearly love to have.”

“Peace, both of you. We’re all of us reeling,” the Roach says, looking at the damage he has done. He shakes his head, then his attention goes to Cardan. He walks toward him, studying the prince’s face. The Roach’s black lips pull back from his teeth in a considering grimace. When he turns back to me, he’s obviously impressed. “Although it seems that one of us kept her head.”

“Hello,” Cardan says, raising his brows and regarding the Roach as though they were sitting down to tea together.

Cardan’s clothes are disarranged, from crawling under tables or being captured and tied, and his infamous tail is showing under the white lawn of his shirt. It is slim, nearly hairless, with a tuft of black fur at the tip. As I watch, the tail forms one wavering curve after another, snaking back and forth, betraying his cool face, telling its own story of uncertainty and fear.

I can see why he hides that thing away.

“We should kill him,” says the Ghost, slouching in the hallway, light brown hair blown across his forehead. “He’s the only member of the royal family who can crown Balekin. Without Cardan, the throne will be forever lost, and we will have avenged Dain.”

Cardan draws a sharp breath and then lets it out slowly. “I’d prefer to live.”

“We don’t work for Dain anymore,” the Roach reminds the Ghost, the nostrils of his long green knife of a nose flaring. “Dain’s dead and beyond caring about thrones or crowns. We sell the prince back to Balekin for everything we can get and leave. Go among the low Courts or the free Folk. There’s fun to be had, and gold. You could come along, Jude. If you want.”

The offer is tempting. Burn it all down. Run. Start over in a place where no one knows me except the Ghost and the Roach.

“I don’t want Balekin’s money.” The Ghost spits on the ground. “And other than that, the boy prince is useless to us. Too young, too weak. If not for Dain, then let’s kill him for all of Faerie.”

“Too young, too weak, too mean,” I put in.

“Wait,” Cardan says. I have imagined him afraid many times, but the reality outstrips those imaginings. Seeing the quickening of his breath, the way he pulls against my careful knots, delights me. “Wait! I could tell you what I know, everything I know, anything about Balekin, anything you’d like. If you want gold and riches, I could get them for you. I know the way to Balekin’s treasury. I have the ten keys to the ten locks of the palace. I could be useful.”

Only in my dreams has Cardan ever been like this. Begging. Miserable. Powerless.

“What did you know about your brother’s plan?” the Ghost asks him, peeling himself off the wall. He limps over.

Cardan shakes his head. “Only that Balekin despised Dain. I despised him as well. He was despicable. I didn’t know he’d managed to convince Madoc of that.”

“What do you mean, despicable?” I ask, indignant, even with the still-healing wound on my hand. Dain’s death washed away the resentment I had for him.

Cardan gives me an indecipherable look. “Dain poisoned his own child, still in the womb. He worked on our father until he trusted no one but Dain. Ask them—surely Dain’s spies know how he made Eldred believe that Elowyn was plotting against him, convinced him that Balekin was a fool. Dain orchestrated my being thrown out of the palace, so that I had to be taken in by my elder brother or go without any home at the Court. He even persuaded Eldred to step down after poisoning his wine so that he became tired and ill—the curse on the crown doesn’t prevent that.”

“That can’t be true.” I think of Liriope, of the letter, of how Balekin wanted proof of who got the poison. But Eldred couldn’t have been poisoned with blusher mushroom.

“Ask your friends,” Cardan says, with a nod to the Roach and the Ghost. “It was one of them who administered the poison that killed the child and its mother.”

I shake my head, but the Ghost doesn’t meet my gaze. “Why would Dain do that?”

“Because he’d fathered the child with Eldred’s consort and was afraid Eldred would find out and choose another of us for his heir.” Cardan seems pleased with himself at having surprised me—surprised *us*, from the looks on the faces of the Roach and the Ghost. I do not like the way they watch him now, as though he might have value after all. “Even the King of Faerie doesn’t like to think of his son taking his place in a lover’s bed.”

It shouldn’t shock me that the Court of Faerie is corrupt and kind of gross. I knew that, just as I knew Madoc could do gruesome things to people he cared about. Just as I knew Dain was never kind. He made me stab my own hand, clean through. He took me on for my usefulness, nothing more.

Faerie might be beautiful, but its beauty is like a golden stag’s carcass, crawling with maggots beneath his hide, ready to burst.

I feel sick from the smell of blood. It’s on my dress, under my fingers, in my nose. How am I supposed to be worse than the Folk?

Sell the prince back to Balekin. I turn the idea over in my mind. Bale-kin would be in my debt. He’d make me a member of the Court, just as I once wanted. He’d give me anything I asked for, any of the things Dain offered and more: land, knighthood, a love mark on my brow so all who looked upon me would be sick with desire, a sword that wove charms with every blow.

And yet none of those things seems all that valuable anymore. None of those are true power. True power isn’t granted. True power can’t be taken away.

I think of what it will be like to have Balekin for a High King, for the Circle of Grackles to devour all the other circles of influence. I think of his starveling servants, of his urging Cardan to kill one of them for training, of the way he ordered Cardan beaten while professing his love for their family.

No, I cannot see myself serving Balekin.

“Prince Cardan is *my* prisoner,” I remind them, pacing back and forth. I’m not good at much, and I’ve been good at being a spy for only a very short time. I am not ready to give that up. “I get to decide what happens to him.”

The Roach and the Ghost exchange glances.

“Unless we’re going to fight,” I say, because they’re not my friends, and I need to remember that. “But I have access to Madoc. I have access to Balekin. I’m our best shot at brokering a deal.”

“Jude,” Cardan cautions me from the chair, but I am beyond caution, especially from him.

There’s a tense moment, but then the Roach cracks a grin. “No, girl, we’re not fighting. If you’ve got a plan, then I’m glad of it. I’m not really much of a planner, unless it’s how to prize out a gem from a nice setting. You stole the boy prince. This is your play, if you think you can make it.”

The Ghost frowns but doesn’t contradict him.

What I must do is put the puzzle pieces together. Here’s what doesn’t make sense—why is Madoc backing Balekin? Balekin is cruel and volatile, two qualities not preferable in a monarch. Even if Madoc believes Balekin will give him the wars he wants, it seems as though he could have gotten those some other way.

I think of the letter I found on Balekin’s desk, the one to Nicasia’s mother: *I know the provenance of the blusher mushroom that you ask after.* Why, after all this time, would Balekin want proof that Dain orchestrated Liriope’s murder? And if he had it, why hadn’t he taken it to Eldred? Unless he *had* and Eldred hadn’t believed him. Or cared. Or … unless the proof was for someone else.

“When was Liriope poisoned?” I ask.

“Seven years ago, in the month of storms,” the Ghost says with a twist in his mouth. “Dain told me that he’d been given a foresight about the child. Is this important or are you just curious?”

“What was the foresight?” I ask.

He shakes his head, as if he doesn’t want the memory, but he answers. “If the boy was born, Prince Dain would never be king.”

What a typical faerie prophecy—one that gives you a warning about what you’ll lose but never promises you anything. The boy is dead, but Prince

Dain will never be king.

Let me not be that kind of fool, to base my strategies on riddles.

“So it’s true,” the Roach says quietly. “You’re the one who killed her.” The Ghost’s frown deepens. It didn’t occur to me until then that they might not know one another’s assignments.

Both of them look uncomfortable. I wonder if the Roach would have done it. I wonder what it means that the Ghost did. When I look at him now, I don’t know what I see.

“I’m going to go home,” I say. “I’ll pretend I got lost at the coronation revel. I should be able to figure out what Cardan is worth to them. I’ll come back tomorrow and run the particulars by you both and the Bomb, if she’s here. Give me a day to see what I can do and your oath to make no decisions until then.”

“If the Bomb has better sense than we do, she’s already gone to ground.” The Roach points to a cabinet. Wordlessly, the Ghost goes and gets out a bottle, placing it on the worn wooden table. “How do we know you won’t betray us? Even if you think you’re on our side now, you might get back to that stronghold of Madoc’s and reconsider.”

I eye the Roach and the Ghost speculatively. “I’ll have to leave Cardan in your care, which means trusting you. I promise not to betray you, and you promise that the prince will be here when I get back.”

Cardan looks relieved at the idea that there will be a delay, whatever happens next. Or perhaps he’s just relieved by the presence of the bottle.

“You could be a kingmaker,” the Ghost says. “That’s seductive. You could make Balekin even more deeply indebted to your father.”

“He’s not my father,” I say sharply. “And if I decide that I want to throw in with Madoc, well then, so long as you get paid, it won’t matter, will it?”

“I guess not,” the Ghost says grudgingly. “But if you come back here with Madoc or anyone else, we’ll kill Cardan. And then we’ll kill you. Understood?”

I nod. If it wasn’t for Prince Dain’s geas, they might have compelled me. Of course, whether Prince Dain’s geas lasted past his death, I do not know and am afraid to find out.

“And if you take more than the day you asked for to get back, we’ll kill him and cut our losses,” the Ghost continues. “Prisoners are like damson

plums. The longer you keep them, the less valuable they become. Eventually, they spoil. One day and one night. Don’t be late.”

Cardan flinches and tries to catch my eye, but I ignore him.

“I’ll agree to that,” I say, because I am no fool. None of us is feeling all that trusting at the moment. “So long as you swear Cardan will be here and hale when I return tomorrow, alone.”

And because they’re not fools, either, they swear it.

I don’t know what I expect to find when I get home. It’s a long walk through the woods, longer because I give the encampments of the Folk here for the coronation a wide berth. My dress is dirty and tattered at the hem, my feet are sore and cold. When I arrive, Madoc’s estate looks the way it always does, familiar as my own step.

I think of all the other dresses hanging in my closet, waiting to be worn, the slippers waiting to be danced in. I think of the future I thought I was going to have and the one yawning in front of me like a chasm.

In the hall, I see that there are more knights here than I am used to, coming in and out of Madoc’s parlor. Servants rush back and forth, bringing tankards and inkpots and maps. Few spare me a look.

There’s a cry from across the hall. Vivienne. She and Oriana are in the parlor. Vivi runs toward me, throws her arms around me.

“I was going to kill him,” she says. “I was going to kill him if his stupid plan got you hurt.”

I realize I have not moved. I bring one hand up to touch her hair, let my fingers slip to her shoulder. “I’m fine,” I say. “I just got swept up in the crowd. I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

Everything is, of course, not at all fine. But no one tries to contradict me. “Where are the others?”

“Oak is in bed,” Oriana says. “And Taryn is outside Madoc’s study. She’ll be along in a moment.”

Vivi’s expression shifts at that, although I am not sure how to read it.

I go up the stairs to my room, where I wash the paint off my face and the mud off my feet. Vivi follows me, perches on a stool. Her cat eyes are bright gold in the sunlight streaming in from my balcony. She doesn’t speak as I take a comb to my hair, raking through the tangles. I dress myself in dark colors, in a deep blue tunic with a high collar and tight sleeves, in shiny black boots, with new gloves to cover my hands. I strap Nightfell onto a heavier belt and surreptitiously put the ring with the royal seal into my pocket.

It feels so surreal to be in my room, with my stuffed animals and my books and my collection of poisons. With Cardan’s copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* sitting on my bedside table. A new wave of panic passes over me. I’m supposed to figure out how to turn the capture of the missing prince of Faerie to my advantage. Here, in my childhood home, I want to laugh at my daring. Just who do I think I am?

“What happened to your throat?” Vivi asks, frowning at me. “And what’s wrong with your left hand?”

I forgot how carefully I had concealed those injuries. “They’re not important, not with everything that happened. Why did he do it?”

“You mean, why did Madoc help Balekin?” she says, lowering her voice. “I don’t know. Politics. He doesn’t care about murder. He doesn’t care that it’s his fault Princess Rhyia is dead. He doesn’t care, Jude. He’s never cared. That’s what makes him a monster.”

“Madoc can’t really want Balekin to rule Elfhame,” I say. Balekin would influence how Faerie interacts with the mortal world for centuries, how much blood is shed, and whose. All of Faerie will be like Hollow Hall.

That’s when I hear Taryn’s voice float up the stairwell. “Locke has been in with Madoc for ages. He doesn’t know anything about where Cardan is hiding.”

Vivi goes still, watching my face. “Jude—” she says. Her voice is mostly breath.

“Madoc’s probably just trying to frighten him,” Oriana says. “You know he’s not keen on arranging a marriage in the middle of all this turmoil.”

Before Vivi can say anything else, before she can stop me, I've gone to the top of the stairs.

I recall the words Locke said to me after I'd fought in the tournament and pissed off Cardan: *You're like a story that hasn't happened yet. I want to see what you will do. I want to be part of the unfolding of the tale*. When he said that he wanted to see what I would do, did he mean to find out what would happen if he broke my heart?

If I can't find a good enough story, I make one.

Cardan's words when I asked if he thought I didn't deserve Locke echo in my head. *Oh no*, he'd said with a smirk. *You're perfect for each other.* And at the coronation: *Time to change partners. Oh, did I steal your line?*

He knew. How he must have laughed. How they all must have laughed.

"So I suppose I know who your lover is now," I call to my twin sister.

Taryn looks up and blanches. I descend the stairs slowly, carefully.

I wonder if, when Locke and his friends laughed, she laughed with them.

All the odd looks, the tension in her voice when I talked about Locke, her concern about what he and I were doing in the stables, what we'd done at his house—all of it makes sudden, awful sense. I feel the sharp stab of betrayal.

I draw Nightfell.

"I challenge you," I tell Taryn. "To a duel. For my honor, which was grievously betrayed."

Taryn's eyes widen. "I wanted to tell you," she says. "There were so many times I started to say something, but I just couldn't. Locke said if I could endure, it would be a test of love."

I remember his words from the revel: *Do you love me enough to give me up? Isn't that a test of love?*

I guess she passed the test, and I failed.

"So he proposed to you," I say. "While the royal family got butchered. That's so romantic."

Oriana gives a little gasp, probably afraid that Madoc would hear me, that he'd object to my characterization. Taryn looks a little pale, too. I suppose since none of them actually saw it, they could have been told nearly anything. One doesn't have to lie to deceive.

My hand tightens on the hilt of Nightfell. "What did Cardan say that made you cry the day after we came back from the mortal world?" I

remember my hands buried in his velvet doublet, his back hitting the tree when I shoved him. And then later, how she denied it had anything to do with me. How she wouldn't tell me what it did have to do with.

For a long moment, she doesn't answer. By her expression, I know she doesn't want to tell me the truth.

"It was about this, wasn't it? He knew. They all knew." I think of Nicasia sitting at Locke's dining table, seeming for a moment to take me into her confidence. *He ruins things. That's what he likes. To ruin things.*

I thought she'd been talking about Cardan.

"He said it was because of me that he kicked dirt onto your food," Taryn says, voice soft. "Locke tricked them into thinking it was you who stole him away from Nicasia. So it was you they were punishing. Cardan said you were suffering in my place and that if you knew why, you'd back down, but I couldn't tell you."

For a long moment, I do nothing but take in her words. Then I throw my sword down between us. It clangs on the floor. "Pick it up," I tell her.

Taryn shakes her head. "I don't want to fight you."

"You sure about that?" I stand in front of her, in her face, annoyingly close. I can feel how much she itches to take my shoulders and shove. It must have galled her that I kissed Locke, that I slept in his bed. "I think maybe you do. I think you'd love to hit me. And I know I want to hit you."

There's a sword hung high on the wall over the hearth, beneath a silken banner with Madoc's turned-moon crest. I climb onto a nearby chair, step up onto the mantel, and lift it from its hook. It will do.

I hop down and walk toward her, pointing steel at her heart.

"I'm out of practice," she says.

"I'm not." I close the distance between us. "But you'll have the better sword, and you can strike the first blow. That's fair and more than fair."

Taryn looks at me for a long moment, then picks up Nightfell. She steps back several paces and draws.

Across the room, Oriana springs to her feet with a gasp. She doesn't come toward us, though. She doesn't stop us.

There are so many broken things that I don't know how to fix. But I know how to fight.

"Don't be idiots!" Vivi shouts from the balcony. I cannot give her much of my attention. I am too focused on Taryn as she moves across the floor.

Madoc taught us both, and he taught us well.

She swings.

I block her blow, our swords slamming together. The metal rings out, echoing through the room like a bell. “Was it fun to deceive me? Did you like the feeling of having something over me? Did you like that he was flirting and kissing me and all the while promising you would be his wife?”

“No!” She parries my first series of blows with some effort, but her muscles remember technique. She bares her teeth. “I hated it, but I’m not like you. I want to belong here. Defying them makes everything worse. You never asked me before you went against Prince Cardan—maybe he started it because of me, but you kept it going. You didn’t care what it brought down on either of our heads. I had to show Locke I was different.”

A few of the servants have gathered to watch.

I ignore them, ignore the soreness in my arms from digging a grave only a night before, ignore the sting of the wound through my palm. My blade slices Taryn’s skirt, cutting nearly to her skin. Her eyes go wide, and she stumbles back.

We trade a series of fast blows. She’s breathing harder, not used to being pushed like this, but not backing down, either.

I beat my blade against hers, not giving her time to do more than defend herself. “So this was *revenge*?” We used to spar when we were younger, with practice sticks. And since then we’ve engaged in hair pulling, shouting matches, and ignoring each other—but we’ve never fought like this, never with live steel.

“Taryn! Jude!” Vivi yells, starting toward the spiral stair. “Stop or I will stop you.”

“You hate the Folk.” Taryn’s eyes flash as she spins her sword in an elegant strike. “You never cared about Locke. He was just another thing to take from Cardan.”

That staggers me enough that she’s able to get under my guard. Her blade just kisses my side before I whirl away, out of her reach.

She goes on. “You think I’m weak.”

“You *are* weak,” I tell her. “You’re weak and pathetic and I—”

“I’m a mirror,” she shouts. “I’m the mirror you don’t want to look at.”

I swing toward Taryn again, putting my whole weight into the strike. I am so angry, angry at so many things. I hate that I was stupid. I hate that I

was tricked. Fury roars in my head, loud enough to drown out my every other thought.

I swing my sword toward her side in a shining arc.

“I said stop,” Vivi shouts, glamour shimmering in her voice like a net. “Now, *stop*!”

Taryn seems to deflate, relaxing her arms, letting Nightfell hang limply from suddenly loose fingers. She has a vague smile on her face, as though she’s listening to distant music. I try to check my swing, but it’s too late. Instead, I let the sword go. Momentum sends it sailing across the room to slam into a bookshelf and knock a ram’s skull to the ground. Momentum sends me sprawling on the floor.

I turn to Vivi, aghast. “You had no right.” The words tumble out of my mouth, ahead of the more important ones—I could have sliced Taryn in half.

She looks as astonished as I am. “Are you wearing a charm? I saw you change your clothes, and you didn’t have one.”

Dain’s geas. It outlasted his death.

My knees feel raw. My hand is throbbing. My side stings where Nightfell grazed my skin. I am furious she stopped the fight. I am furious she tried to use magic on us. I push myself to my feet. My breath comes hard. There’s sweat on my brow, and my limbs are shaking.

Hands grab me from behind. Three more servants pitch in, getting between us and grabbing my arms. Two have Taryn, dragging her away from me. Vivi blows in Taryn’s face, and she comes to sputtering awareness.

That’s when I see Madoc outside his parlor, lieutenants and knights crowded around him. And Locke.

My stomach drops.

“What is wrong with you two?” Madoc shouts, as angry as I have ever seen him. “Have we not already had a surfeit of death today?”

Which seems like a paradoxical thing to say since he was the cause of so much of it.

“Both of you will wait for me in the game room.” All I can think of is him up on the dais, his blade cracking through Prince Dain’s chest. I cannot meet his gaze. I am shaking all over. I want to scream. I want to run at him. I feel like a child again, a helpless child in a house of death.

I want to do something, but I do nothing.

He turns to Gnarbone. “Go with them. Make sure they stay away from each other.”

I am led into the game room and sit on the floor with my head in my hands. When I bring them away, they are wet with tears. I wipe my fingers quickly against my pants, before Taryn can see.

We wait at least an hour. I don’t say a single thing to Taryn, and she doesn’t say anything to me, either. She sniffles a little, then wipes her nose and doesn’t weep.

I think of Cardan tied to a chair to cheer myself. Then I think of the way he looked up at me through the curtain of his crow-black hair, of the curling edges of his drunken smile, and I don’t feel in the least bit comforted.

I feel exhausted and utterly, completely defeated.

I hate Taryn. I hate Madoc. I hate Locke. I hate Cardan. I hate everyone. I just don’t hate them enough.

“What did he give you?” I ask Taryn, finally tiring of the silence. “Madoc gave me the sword Dad made. That’s the one we were fighting with. He said he had something for you, too.”

She’s quiet long enough that I don’t think she’s going to answer. “A set of knives, for a table. Supposedly, they cut right through bone. The sword is better. It has a name.”

“I guess you could name your steak knives. Meaty the Elder. Gristlebane,” I say, and she makes a little snorting noise that sounds like the smothering of a laugh.

But after that, we lapse back into silence.

Finally, Madoc enters the room, his shadow preceding him, spreading across the floor like a carpet. He tosses a scabbarded Nightfell onto the ground in front of me, and then settles himself on a couch with legs in the shape of bird feet. The couch groans, unused to taking so much weight. Gnarbone nods at Madoc and sees himself out.

“Taryn, I would talk with you of Locke,” Madoc says.

“Did you hurt him?” There is a barely contained sob in her voice. Unkindly, I wonder if she’s putting it on for Madoc’s benefit.

He snorts, as though maybe he’s wondering the same thing. “When he asked for your hand, he told me that although, as I knew, the Folk are changeable people, he’d still like to take you to wife—which is to mean, I suppose, that you will not find him particularly constant. He said nothing about a dalliance with Jude then, but when I asked a moment ago, he told me, ‘mortal feelings are so volatile that it’s impossible to help toying with them a little.’ He told me that you, Taryn, had shown him that you could be like us. No doubt whatever you did to show him that was the source of conflict between you and your sister.”

Taryn’s dress is pillowed around her. She looks composed, although she has a shallow slash on her side and a cut skirt. She looks like a lady of the Gentry, if one does not stare overmuch at the rounded curves of her ears. When I allow myself to truly think on it, I cannot fault Locke for choosing her. I am violent. I’ve been poisoning myself for weeks. I am a killer and a liar and a spy.

I get why *he* chose her. I just wish *she* had chosen me.

“What did you say to him?” Taryn asks.

“That I have never found myself particularly changeable,” Madoc says. “And that I found him to be unworthy of both of you.”

Taryn’s hands curl into fists at her side, but there is no other sign that she’s angry. She has mastered a kind of courtly composure that I have not. While I have studied under Madoc, her tutor has been Oriana. “Do you forbid me from accepting him?”

“It will not end well,” Madoc says. “But I will not stand in front of your happiness. I will not even stand in front of misery that you choose for yourself.”

Taryn says nothing, but the way she lets out her breath shows her relief.

“Go,” he tells her. “And no more fighting with your kin. Whatever pleasure you find with Locke, your loyalty is to your family.”

I wonder what he means by that, by loyalty. I thought he was loyal to Dain. I thought he was sworn to him.

“But she—” Taryn begins, and Madoc holds up a hand, with the menace of his curved black fingernails.

“Was the challenger? Did she thrust a sword into your hand and make you swing it? Do you really think that your sister has no honor, that she would chop you into pieces while you stood by, unarmed?”

Taryn glowers, putting her chin up. “I didn’t want to fight.”

“Then you ought not do so in the future,” Madoc says. “There’s no point in fighting if you’re not intending to win. You may go. Leave me to talk with your sister.”

Taryn stands and walks to the door. With her hand on the heavy brass latch, she turns back, as though to say something else. Whatever camaraderie we found when he wasn’t there is gone. I can see in her face that she wants him to punish me and is half-sure that he won’t.

“You should ask Jude where Prince Cardan is,” she says, narrow-eyed. “The last time I saw him, he was dancing with her.”

With that, she sweeps out the door, leaving me with a thundering heart and the royal seal burning in my pocket. She doesn’t know. She’s just being awful, just trying to get me in trouble with a parting shot. I cannot believe she would say that if she knew.

“Let’s talk about your behavior tonight,” says Madoc, leaning forward.

“Let’s talk about *your* behavior tonight,” I return.

He sighs and rubs one large hand over his face. “You were there, weren’t you? I tried to get you all out, so you wouldn’t have to see it.”

“I thought you loved Prince Dain,” I say. “I thought you were his friend.”

“I loved him well enough,” Madoc says. “Better than I will ever love Balekin. But there are others who have a claim on my loyalty.”

I think again of my puzzle pieces, of the answers I came back home to get. What could Balekin have given or promised Madoc that would have persuaded him to move against Dain?

“Who?” I demand. “What could be worth this much death?”

“Enough,” he growls. “You are not yet on my war council. You will know what there is to know in the fullness of time. Until then, let me assure you that although things are in disarray, my plans are not overturned. What I need now is the youngest prince. If you know where Cardan is, I could get Balekin to offer you a handsome reward. A position in his Court. And the hand of anyone you wanted. Or the still-beating heart of anyone you despised.”

I look at him in surprise. “You think I’d take Locke from Taryn?”

He shrugs. “You seemed like you wanted to take Taryn’s head from her shoulders. She played you false. I don’t know what you might consider a fitting punishment.”

For a moment, we just look at each other. He’s a monster, so if I want to do a very bad thing, he’s not going to judge me for it. Much.

“If you want my advice,” he says slowly, “love doesn’t grow well, fed on pain. Grant me that I know that at least. I love you, and I love Taryn, but I don’t think she’s suited for Locke.”

“And I am?” I cannot help thinking that Madoc’s idea of love doesn’t seem like a very safe thing. He loved my mother. He loved Prince Dain. His love for us is likely to afford us no more protection than it afforded either of them.

“I don’t think *Locke* is suited for *you*.” He smiles his toothy smile. “And if your sister is right and you do know where Prince Cardan is, give him to me. He’s a foppish sort of boy, no good with a sword. He’s charming, in a way, and clever, but nothing worth protecting.”

Too young, too weak, too mean.

I think again of the coup that Madoc had planned with Balekin, wondering how it was supposed to go. Kill the two elder siblings, the ones with influence. Then surely the High King would relent and put the crown on the head of the prince with the most power, the one with the military on his side. Perhaps grudgingly, but once threatened, Eldred would crown Balekin. Except he didn’t. Balekin tried to force his hand, and then everyone died.

Everyone but Cardan. The board swept nearly clear of players.

That can’t be how Madoc thought things would play out. But, still, I remember his lessons on strategy. Every outcome of a plan should lead to victory.

No one can really plan for every variable, though. That’s ridiculous.

“I thought you were supposed to lecture me about not sword fighting in the house,” I say, trying to steer the conversation away from the whereabouts of Cardan. I’ve gotten what I promised the Court of Shadows—an offer. Now I just have to decide what to do with it.

“Must I tell you that if your blade had struck true and you’d hurt Taryn, you would have regretted it all your days? Of all the lessons I imparted to you, I would have thought that was the one I taught you best.” His gaze is

steady on mine. He's talking about my mother. He's talking about murdering my mother.

I can say nothing to that.

"It is a shame you didn't take out that anger on someone more deserving. In times like these, the Folk go missing." He gives me a significant look.

Is he telling me it's okay to kill Locke? I wonder what he'd say if he knew I'd already killed one of the Gentry. If I showed him the body. Apparently, maybe, *congratulations*.

"How do you sleep at night?" I ask him. It's a crappy thing to say, and I am only saying it, I know, because he has shown me just how close I am to being everything I have despised in him.

His eyebrows furrow, and he looks at me as though he's evaluating what sort of answer to give. I imagine myself as he must see me, a sullen girl sitting in judgment of him. "Some are good with pipes or paint. Some have skill in love," he says finally. "My talent is in making war. The only thing that has ever kept me awake was denying it."

I nod slowly.

He gets up. "Think about what I've said, and then think about where your own talents lie."

We both know what that means. We both know what I am good at, what I am—I just chased my sister around the downstairs with a sword. But what to do with that talent is the question.

As I exit the game room, I realize that Balekin must have arrived with his retainers. Knights with his livery—three laughing birds emblazoned on their tabards—stand at attention in the hall. I slink past them and up the stairs, dragging my sword behind me, too exhausted to do anything else.

I am hungry, I realize, but I feel too sick to eat. Is this what it is to be brokenhearted? I am not sure it is Locke I am sick over, so much as the world the way it was before the coronation began. But if I could undo the passing of the days, why not unwind them to before I killed Valerian, why not unwind them until my parents are alive, why not unwind them all the way to the beginning?

There’s a knock on my door, and then it opens without my signaling anything. Vivi comes in, carrying a wooden plate with a sandwich on it, along with a stoppered bottle of amber glass.

“I’m a jerk. I’m an idiot,” I say. “I admit it. You don’t have to lecture me.”

“I thought you were going to give me a hard time about the glamour,” she says. “You know, the one you resisted.”

“You shouldn’t magic your sisters.” I draw the cork on the bottle and take a long swig of water. I didn’t realize how thirsty I was. I guzzle more, nearly draining the whole container in one continuous gulping swallow.

“And you shouldn’t try to chop yours in half.” She settles back against my pillows, against my worn stuffed animals. Idly, she picks up the snake and flicks the forks of its felt tongue. “I thought all of it—swordplay, knighthood—I thought it was a game.”

I remember how angry she was when Taryn and I gave in to Faerie and started having fun. Crowns of flowers on our heads, shooting bows and arrows at the sky. Eating candied violets and falling asleep with our heads pillowed on logs. We were children. Children can laugh all day and still cry themselves to sleep at night. But to hold a blade in my hand, a blade like the one that killed our parents, and think it was a toy, she’d have to believe I was heartless.

“It’s not,” I say finally.

“No,” Vivi says, wrapping the stuffed snake around the stuffed cat.

“Did she tell you about him?” I ask, climbing onto my bed next to her. It feels good to lie down, maybe a little too good. I am instantly drowsy.

“I didn’t know Taryn was with Locke,” Vivi says, deliberately giving me the whole sentence so I won’t have to wonder if she’s trying to trick me. “But I don’t want to talk about Locke. Forget him. I want us to leave Faerie. Tonight.”

That makes me sit upright. “What?”

She laughs at my reaction. It’s such a normal sound, so completely out of step with the high drama of the last two days. “I thought that would surprise you. Look, whatever happens next here, it’s not going to be good. Balekin’s an asshole. And he’s dumb on top of it. You should have heard Dad swearing on our way home. Let’s just go.”

“What about Taryn?” I ask.

“I’ve already asked her, and I’m not going to tell you if she agreed to come or not. I want you to answer for *you*. Jude, listen. I know you’re keeping secrets. Something is making you sick. You’re paler and thinner, and your eyes have a weird shine.”

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Liar,” she says, but the accusation has no heat. “I know that you’re stuck here in Faerie because of me. I know that the shittiest things that have happened in your whole life are because of me. You’ve never said it, which is kind of you, but I know. You’ve had to turn yourself into something else, and you’ve done it. Sometimes, when I look at you, I’m not sure if you’d even know how to be human anymore.”

I don’t know what to do with that—compliment and insult all at once. But behind it is a feeling of prophecy.

“You fit in better here than I do,” Vivi says. “But I bet it cost you something.”

I mostly don’t like to imagine the life I could have had, the one without magic in it. The one where I went to a regular school and learned regular things. The one where I had a living father and mother. The one where my older sister was the weirdo. Where I wasn’t so angry. Where my hands weren’t stained with blood. I picture it now, and I feel strange, tense all over, my stomach churning.

What I feel is panic.

When the wolves come for that Jude, she’ll be eaten up in an instant—and wolves always come. It frightens me to think of myself so vulnerable. But as I am now, I am well on my way to becoming one of the wolves. Whatever essential thing the other Jude has, whatever part that’s unbroken in her and broken in me, that thing might be unrecoverable. Vivi is right; it cost me something to be the way I am. But I do not know what. And I don’t know if I can get it back. I don’t even know if I want it.

But maybe I could try.

“What would we do in the mortal world?” I ask her.

Vivi smiles and pushes the plate with the sandwich toward me. “Go to movies. Visit cities. Learn to drive a car. There are lots of the Folk who don’t live in the Courts, don’t play at politics. We could live any way we like. In a loft. In a tree. Whatever you want.”

“With Heather?” I pick up the food and take a huge bite. Sliced mutton and pickled dandelion greens. My stomach growls.

“Hopefully,” she says. “You can help me explain things to her.”

It occurs to me for the first time that, whether she knows it or not, she isn’t suggesting running away to be *human*. She’s suggesting we live like the wild fey, among mortals, but not of them. We’d steal the cream from their cups and the coins from their pockets. But we wouldn’t settle down and get boring jobs. Or at least she wouldn’t.

I wonder what Heather is going to think of that.

Once Prince Cardan is dealt with in some way, then what? Even if I figure out the mystery of Balekin’s letters, there’s still no good place for me. The Court of Shadows will be disbanded. Taryn will be wed. Vivi will be gone. I could go with her. I could try to figure out what’s broken in me, try to start over.

I think of the Roach’s offer, to go with them to another court. To start over in Faerie. Both feel like giving up, but what else is there to do? I thought that once I was home, I’d come up with a plan, but so far I haven’t.

“I couldn’t leave tonight,” I say hesitatingly.

She gasps, hand to her heart. “You’re seriously thinking about it.”

“There are some things I need to finish. Give me a day.” I keep bargaining for the same thing over and over: time. But in a day I will have squared things with the Court of Shadows. Arrangements will be made for Cardan. One way or another, everything will be settled. I will wring whatever payment I can from Faerie. And if I still don’t have a plan, it will be too late to make one. “What’s a single day in your eternal, everlasting, interminable life?”

“One day to decide or one day to pack your bags?”

I take another bite of sandwich. “Both.”

Vivi rolls her eyes. “Just remember, in the mortal world, it won’t be the way it is here.” She goes to the door. “*You* wouldn’t have to be the way you are here.”

I hear Vivi’s steps in the hall. I take another bite of my sandwich. I chew and swallow it, but I don’t taste anything.

What if the way I am is the way I am? What if, when everything else is different, I’m not?

I take Cardan’s royal ring out of my pocket and hold it in the center of my palm. I shouldn’t have this. Mortal hands shouldn’t hold it. Even looking closely seems wrong, yet I do anyway. The gold is full of a deep rich redness, and the edges are smoothed by constant wear. There is a little bit of wax stuck in the impression, and I try to root it out with the edge of my nail. I wonder how much the ring would be worth out in the world.

Before I can persuade myself not to, I slip it onto my unworthy finger.

CHAPTER 24

I wake up the next afternoon with the taste of poison in my mouth. I had gone to sleep in my clothes, curled around Nightfell's scabbard.

Although I don't really want to, I pad down to Taryn's door and knock on it. I have to say something to her before the world turns upside down again. I have to make things right between us. But no one answers, and when I turn the knob and enter, I find her chamber is empty.

I head down to Oriana's rooms, hoping she might know where I can find Taryn. I peek in through the open door and find her out on her balcony, looking at the trees and the lake beyond. The wind whips her hair behind her like a pale banner. It balloons her filmy dress.

"What are you doing?" I ask, coming in.

She turns, surprised. And well she might be. I am not sure that I have ever sought her out before. "My people had wings once," she says, the longing clear in her voice. "And though I've never had a pair of my own, sometimes I feel the lack of them."

I wonder if, when she imagines having wings, she pictures herself flying up into the sky and away from all this.

"Have you seen Taryn?" Vines curl around the posts of Oriana's bed, their stems a vivid green. Blue flowers hang down in clumps over where she sleeps, making for a richly perfumed bower. There is nowhere to sit that

doesn’t seem crawling with plants. It’s hard for me to picture Madoc comfortable here.

“She’s gone to the house of her betrothed, but they’ll be at the High King Balekin’s manor tomorrow. You will be there, too. He’s throwing a feast for your father and some of the Seelie and Unseelie rulers. You’ll be expected to be less hostile to each other.”

I cannot even imagine the horror, the awkwardness, of being dressed in gossamer, the smell of faerie fruit heavy in the air, while I am supposed to pretend that Balekin is anything but a murdering monster.

“Will Oak go?” I ask her, and feel the first real pang of regret. If I leave, I won’t get to see Oak grow up.

Oriana clasps her hands together and walks over to her dressing table. Her jewelry hangs there—slices of agate on long chains of raw crystal beads, collars set with moonstones, deep green bloodstones strung together, and an opal pendant, bright as fire in the sunlight. And on a silver tray, beside a pair of ruby earrings in the shape of stars, is a golden acorn.

A golden acorn, twin to the one I found in the pocket of the gown that Locke gave me. The dress that had belonged to his mother. Liriope. Locke’s mother. I think of her madcap, joyful dresses, of her dust-covered bedroom. Of how the acorn in her pocket opened to show a bird inside.

“I tried to convince Madoc that Oak was too young and that this dinner will be too dull, but Madoc insisted that he come. Perhaps you can sit beside him and keep him amused.”

I think about the story of Liriope, of how Oriana told it to me when she believed I was getting too close to Prince Dain. Of how Oriana had been a consort to the High King Eldred before she was Madoc’s wife. I think about why she might have needed to make a swift marriage, what she might have had to hide.

I think about the note I found on Balekin’s desk, the one in Dain’s hand, a sonnet to a lady with *sunrise hair* and *starlit eyes*.

I think about what the bird said: *My dearest friend, these are the last words of Liriope. I have three golden birds to scatter. Three attempts to get one into your hand. I am too far gone for any antidote, and so if you hear this, I leave you with the burden of my secrets and the last act of my heart. Protect him. Take him far from the dangers of this Court. Keep him safe, and never, ever tell him the truth of what happened to me.*

I think again about strategy, about Dain and Oriana and Madoc. I recall when Oriana first came to us. How quickly Oak was born and how we weren't allowed to see him for months because he was so sickly. About how she has always been protective of him around us, but maybe that was for one reason, when I had assumed another.

Just as I'd assumed the child Liriope wanted her friend to take was Locke. But what if the baby she had been carrying didn't die with her?

I feel as though I've been robbed of breath, as if getting out words is a struggle against the very air in my lungs. I cannot quite believe what I am about to say, even as I know it's the conclusion that makes sense. "Oak isn't Madoc's child, is he? Or, at least, no more Madoc's than I am."

If the boy is born, Prince Dain will never be king.

Oriana claps a hand over my mouth. Her skin smells like the air after a snowfall. "Don't say that." She speaks close to my face, voice trembling. "Do not ever say that again. If you ever loved Oak, do not say those words."

I push her hand away. "Prince Dain was his father and Liriope his mother. Oak is the reason Madoc backed Balekin, the reason he wanted Dain dead. And now he's the key to the crown."

Her eyes widen, and she takes my chilly hand in hers. She has never not seemed strange to me, like a creature from a fairy tale, pale as a ghost. "How could you know that? How could you know any of this, human child?"

I had thought Prince Cardan was the most valuable individual in all of Faerie. I had no idea.

Swiftly, I shut the door and close up her balcony. She watches me and doesn't protest. "Where is he now?" I ask her.

"Oak? With his nurse," she whispers, drawing me toward the little divan in one corner, patterned with a snake brocade and covered in a fur. "Talk quickly."

"First, tell me what happened seven years ago."

Oriana takes a deep breath. "You might think that I would have been jealous of Liriope for being another of Eldred's consorts, but I wasn't. I loved her. She was always laughing, impossible not to love—even though her son has come between you and Taryn, I cannot help loving him a little, for her sake."

I wonder what it was like for Locke to have his mother be the lover of the High King. I am torn between sympathy and a desire for his life to have been as miserable as possible.

“We were confidantes,” Oriana says. “She told me when she began her affair with Prince Dain. She didn’t seem to take any of it seriously. She had loved Locke’s father very much, I think. Dain and Eldred were dalliances, distractions. Our kind do not worry overmuch about children, as you know. Faerie blood is thin. I don’t think it occurred to her that she might have a second son, a mere decade after she bore Locke. Some of us have centuries between children. Some of us never carry any at all.”

I nod. That’s why human men and women are the unacknowledged necessity they are. Without their strengthening the bloodline, Faerie would die out, despite the endless span of their lives.

“Blusher mushroom is a terrible way to die,” Oriana says, hand to her throat. “You begin to slow, your limbs tremble until you can move no more. But you are still conscious until everything inside you stops, like frozen clockwork. Imagine the horror of that, imagine hoping that you might yet move, imagine straining to move. By the time she got me the message, she was dead. I cut …” Her voice falters. I know what the rest of the sentence must be. She must have cut the child out of Liriope’s belly. I cannot picture prim Oriana doing such a brutal, brave thing—pressing the point of her knife into flesh, finding the right spot and slicing. Prizing a child from a womb, holding its wet body against her. And yet who else could have done it?

“You saved him,” I say, because if she doesn’t want to talk about that part, she doesn’t have to.

“I named him for Liriope’s acorn,” she tells me, her voice barely more than a whisper. “My little golden Oak.”

I wanted so badly to believe that being in Dain’s service was an honor, that he was someone worth following. That’s what comes of hungering for something: You forget to check if it’s rotten before you gobble it down. “Did you know it was Dain who poisoned Liriope?”

Oriana shakes her head. “Not for a long time. It could have been another of Eldred’s lovers. Or Balekin—there were rumors he was the one responsible. I even wondered if it could have been Eldred, if he had poisoned her for dallying with his son. But then Madoc discovered Dain

had obtained the blusher mushroom. He insisted I never let Oak be anywhere near the prince. He was furious—angry in a frightening way I had never seen before."

It's not hard to see why Madoc would be furious with Dain. Madoc, who once thought his own wife and child were dead. Madoc, who loved Oak. Madoc, who reminded us over and over that family came before all else.

"And so you married Madoc because he could protect you?" I have only blurry memories of his courting Oriana, and then they were sworn, with a child on the way. Maybe I thought it was unusual, but anyone can have good fortune. And it had seemed like bad fortune to me at the time, since Taryn and I worried what the new baby would mean for us. We thought Madoc might tire of us and drop us somewhere with a pocket full of gold and riddles pinned to our shirts. No one finds bad fortune suspicious.

Oriana looks out the glass doors at the wind blowing the trees. "Madoc and I have an understanding. We do not pretend with each other."

I have no idea what that means, but it sounds like it makes for a cold and careful marriage.

"So what's his play?" I ask her. "I don't imagine he intends for Bale-kin to keep the throne long. I think he would consider it some kind of crime against strategy to leave such an obvious move unexploited."

"What do you mean?" She looks honestly baffled. They don't pretend with each other, my ass.

"He's going to put Oak on the throne," I tell her, as though it's obvious. Because it is obvious. I don't know how he intends to do it—or when—but I am sure he does. Of course he does.

"Oak," she says. "No, no, no. Jude, no. He's just a child."

Take him far from the dangers of this Court. That's what Liriope's note had said. Maybe Oriana should have listened.

I remember what Madoc told us at the dinner table ages ago, about how the throne was vulnerable during a change in power. Whatever he intended to happen with Balekin—and now I am wondering if what he imagined was for Dain to die and Balekin to die, too, for the High King to suspend the coronation, for Madoc to make a different play—he had to see the opportunity in front of him, with only three royals left. If Oak was the High King, then Madoc could be the regent. He would rule over Faerie until Oak came of age.

And then, who knew what might happen? If he could keep Oak in check, he might rule over Faerie forever.

“I was just a child once, too,” I tell her. “I don’t think Madoc was enormously concerned about what I could handle then, and I don’t think he will be too worried about Oak now.”

It’s not like I don’t think he loves Oak. Of course he loves him. He loves me, too. He loved my mother. But he is what he is. He cannot be other than his nature.

Oriana grabs my hand, squeezing it tightly enough that her nails sink into my skin. “You don’t understand. Child kings do not survive long, and Oak is a frail boy. He was too little when he was brought into this world. No king or queen from any Court will bow their heads to him. He wasn’t raised for this burden. You must stop it.”

What might Madoc do with so much power unchecked? What might I do with a brother on the throne? And I could put him there. I have the winning card to play, because while Balekin would resist crowning Oak, I bet Cardan wouldn’t. I could make my brother the High King and myself a princess. All that power is right there for the taking. All I have to do is reach out my hand.

The odd thing about ambition is this: You can acquire it like a fever, but it is not so easy to shed. Once, I was content to hope for knighthood and the power to force Cardan and his friends to leave me alone. All I wanted was to find some place to fit in here in Faerie.

Now I wonder what it would be like to choose the next king.

I think of the tide of blood running over the stone dais to drip down onto the packed-earthen floor of the hill. Running over the bottom edge of the crown so that when Balekin had lifted it, his hands had been smeared red. I imagine that crown on Oak’s brow and flinch from the image.

I remember, too, what it had felt like to be glamoured by Oak. Over and over I’d slapped myself until my cheek was red and hot and sore. A bruise bloomed the next morning, a bruise that didn’t fade for a week. That’s what children do with power.

“What makes you think I can stop it?” I demand.

Oriana doesn’t release my hand. “You once said that I was wrong about you, that you would never hurt Oak. Tell me, *can* you do anything? Is there a chance?”

I’m not a monster, I’d told her, back when I said I would never hurt Oak. But maybe being a monster was my calling. “Maybe,” I tell her, which is no answer at all.

On my way out, I spot my little brother. He is out in the garden, picking a bouquet of foxgloves. He’s laughing, sunlight turning his brown hair gold. When his nurse comes toward him, he darts away from her.

I bet he doesn’t even know that those flowers are poison.

Laughter greets me when I return to the Court of Shadows. I am expecting to find Cardan as I left him, cowed and quiet, perhaps even more miserable than before. Instead, his hands have been untied, and he is at the table, playing cards with the Roach, the Ghost—and the Bomb. At the center are a pile of jewels and a jug of wine. Two empty bottles rest beneath the table, green glass catching the candlelight.

"Jude," the Bomb calls happily. "Sit down! We'll deal you in."

I am relieved to see her, here and unscathed. But nothing else about this tableau is any good.

Cardan grins at me as though we've been great friends all our lives. I forgot how charming he can be—and how dangerous that is.

"What are you doing?" I burst out. "He's supposed to be tied up! He's our *prisoner*."

"Worry not. Where's he going to go?" the Roach asks. "You really think he can get past all three of us?"

"I don't mind being one-handed," Cardan interjects. "But if you're going to restrain both of my hands, then you'll have to pour the wine directly into my mouth."

"He told us where the old king kept the really good bottles," says the Bomb, pushing back her white hair. "Not to mention a stash of jewelry that

belonged to Elowyn. He figured that in the confusion, no one would notice if it got lifted, and so far, no one has. Easiest job the Roach has ever done."

I want to scream. They weren't supposed to like him, but why wouldn't they? He's a prince who's treating them with respect. He's Dain's brother. He's Folk, like them.

"Everything is spiraling into chaos anyway," says Cardan. "Might as well have some fun. Don't you think, Jude?"

I take a deep breath. If he undermines my position here, if he manages to make me an outsider, then I am never going to get the Court of Shadows to go along with the plan that is still jumbled up in my head. I can't seem to figure out how to help anyone. The last thing I need is him making everything worse.

"What did he offer you?" I ask, like we're all in on the same joke. Yes, it's a gamble. Maybe Cardan didn't offer them anything at all.

I try not to seem like I'm holding my breath. I try not to show how small Cardan makes me feel.

The Ghost gives me one of his rare smiles. "Mostly gold, but also power. Position."

"A lot of things he hasn't got," said the Bomb.

"I thought we were friends," Cardan says halfheartedly.

"I'm going to take him in the back," I say, putting my hand on the top of the chair in a proprietary fashion. I need to get him out of the room before he gets the better of me in front of them. I need to get him away now.

"And do what?" asks the Roach.

"He's *my* prisoner," I remind them, squatting down and slicing through the strips of my dress still tying his legs to the chair. I realize he must have slept this way, sitting upright, if he slept at all. But he doesn't look tired. He smiles down at me, as if the reason I'm on my knees is because I am curtsying.

I want to wipe that smile off his face, but maybe I can't. Maybe he'll go on smiling that way to his grave.

"Can't we stay out here?" Cardan asks me. "There's wine out here."

That makes the Roach snicker. "Something bothering you, princeling? You and Jude don't get along after all?"

Cardan's expression shifts into something that appears to resemble worry. Good.

I lead him into Dain’s office, which I guess I’ve just commandeered for my own. He walks unsteadily, his legs stiff from being bound. Also possibly because he has helped my crew down several bottles of wine. No one stops me from taking him, though. I close the door and turn the lock.

“Sit down,” I tell him, pointing to a chair.

He does.

I walk around, settling myself on the other side of the desk.

It occurs to me that if I kill him, I can finally stop thinking about him. If I kill him, I won’t have to feel like this anymore.

Without him, there’s no clear path to putting Oak on the throne. I’d have to trust that Madoc had some way of forcing Balekin into crowning him. Without him, I have no cards to play. No plan. No helping my brother. No nothing.

Maybe it would be worth it.

The crossbow is where I left it, in the drawer of Dain’s desk. I draw it out, cock it back, and point it at Cardan. He draws a ragged breath.

“You’re going to shoot me?” He blinks. “Right now?”

My finger caresses the trigger. I feel calm, gloriously calm. This is weakness, to put fear above ambition, above family, above love, but it feels good. It feels like being powerful.

“I can see why you’d want to,” he says, as though reading my face and coming to some decision. “But I’d really prefer if you didn’t.”

“Then you shouldn’t have smirked at me constantly—you think I am going to stand being mocked, here, now? You still so sure you’re better than me?” My voice shakes a little, and I hate him even more for it. I have trained every day to be dangerous, and he is entirely in my power, yet I’m the one who is afraid.

Fearing him is a habit, a habit I could break with a bolt to his heart.

He holds up his hands in protest, long bare fingers splayed. I am the one with the royal ring. “I’m nervous,” he says. “I smile a lot when I’m nervous. I can’t help it.”

That is not at all what I expected him to say. I lower the crossbow momentarily.

He keeps talking, as though he doesn’t want to leave me too much time to think. “You are *terrifying*. Nearly my whole family is dead, and while they never had much love for me, I don’t want to join them. I’ve spent all

night worrying what you're going to do, and I know exactly what I deserve. I have a reason to be nervous." He's talking to me as though we're friends instead of enemies. It works, too: I relax a little. When I realize that, I am nearly freaked out enough to shoot him outright.

"I'll tell you whatever you want," he says. "Anything."

"No word games?" The temptation is enormous. Everything Taryn told me is still rattling around in my head, reminding me how little I know.

He puts a hand over where his heart should be. "I swear it."

"And if I shoot you anyway?"

"You might well," he says, wry. "But I want your word that you won't."

"My word isn't worth much," I remind him.

"So you keep saying." He raises his brows. "It's not comforting, I've got to tell you."

I give a surprised laugh. The crossbow wavers in my hand. Cardan's gaze is locked on it. With deliberate slowness, I set it down on the wood of the desk. "You tell me whatever I want to know—all of it—and I won't shoot you."

"And what can I do to persuade you not to turn me over to Balekin and Madoc?" He lifts a single eyebrow. I am not used to the force of his attention being on me like this. My heart speeds.

All I can do is glower in return. "How about you concentrate on staying alive?"

He shrugs. "What do you want to know?"

"I found a piece of paper with my name on it," I say. "Over and over, just my name."

He flinches a little but doesn't say anything.

"Well?" I prompt.

"That's not a question," he groans, as though exasperated. "Ask me a proper question, and I'll give you an answer."

"You're terrible at this whole 'telling me whatever I want to know' thing." My hand goes to the crossbow, but I don't pick it up.

He sighs. "Just ask me something. Ask about my tail. Don't you want to see it?" He raises his brows.

I have seen his tail, but I am not going to give him the satisfaction of telling him that. "You want me to ask you something? Fine. When did Taryn start whatever it is she has with Locke?"

He laughs with delight. This appears to be a discussion he isn't interested in avoiding. Typical. "Oh, I wondered when you would ask about that. It was some months ago. He told us all about it—throwing stones at her window, leaving her notes to meet him in the woods, wooing her by moonlight. He swore us to silence, made it all seem like a lark. I think, in the beginning, he did it to make Nicasia jealous. But later …"

"How did he know it was her room?" I ask, frowning.

That makes his smile grow. "Maybe he didn't. Maybe either of you would have done as his first mortal conquest. I believe his goal is to have both of you in the end."

I don't like any of this. "What about you?"

He gives me a quick, odd look. "Locke hasn't gotten around to seducing me yet, if that's what you're asking. I suppose I should be insulted."

"That's not what I mean. You and Nicasia were …" I don't know what to call them. *Together* isn't quite the word for an evil and beautiful team, ruining people and enjoying it.

"Yes, Locke stole her from me," Cardan says with a tightness in his jaw. He doesn't smile, doesn't smirk. Clearly, it costs him something to tell me this. "And I don't know if Locke wanted her to make some other lover jealous or to make me angry or just because of Nicasia's magnificence. Nor do I know what fault in me made her choose him. Now do you believe I am giving you the answers you were promised?"

The thought of Cardan being brokenhearted is almost beyond my imagining. I nod. "Did you love her?"

"What kind of question is that?" he demands.

I shrug. "I want to know."

"Yes," he says, his gaze on the desk, on my hand resting there. I am suddenly conscious of my fingernails, bitten to the quick. "I loved her."

"Why do you want me dead?" I ask, because I want to remind us both that answering embarrassing questions is the least of what he deserves. We're enemies, no matter how many jokes he tells or how friendly he seems. Charmers are charming, but that's all they are.

He lets out a long breath and puts his head down on his hands, not paying nearly enough attention to the crossbow. "You mean with the nixies? You were the one who was thrashing around and throwing things at them. They're extremely lazy creatures, but I thought you might actually annoy

them into taking a bite out of you. I may be rotten, but my one virtue is that I'm not a killer. I wanted to frighten you, but I never wanted you *dead*. I never wanted anyone dead."

I think of the river and how, when one nixie detached from the others, Cardan waited until it paused and then left so we could get out of the water. I stare at him, at the traces of silver on his face from the party, at the inky black of his eyes. I suddenly remember how he pulled Valerian off me when I was choking on faerie fruit.

I never wanted anyone dead.

Against my will, I recall the way he held that sword in the study with Balekin and the sloppiness of his technique. I thought he'd been doing that deliberately, to annoy his brother. Now, for the first time, I consider the possibility that he just doesn't much like sword fighting. That he'd never learned it particularly well. That if we ever fought, I would win. I consider all the things I have done to become a worthy adversary of him, but maybe I haven't been fighting Cardan at all. Maybe I've been fighting my own shadow.

"Valerian tried to murder me outright. Twice. First in the tower, then in my room at my house."

Cardan lifts his head, and his whole posture stiffens as though some uncomfortable truth just came home to him. "I thought when you said you killed him you meant that you tracked him down and …" His voice trails off, and he starts over. "Only a fool would break into the general's house."

I draw down the collar of my shirt so he can see where Valerian tried to strangle me. "I have another on my shoulder from where he knocked me into the floor. Believe me yet?"

He reaches toward me, as though he's going to run his fingers over the bruises. I bring up the crossbow, and he thinks better of it. "Valerian liked pain," he says. "Anyone's. Mine, even. I knew he wanted to hurt you." He pauses, seeming to actually have heard his own words. "And he had. I thought he'd be satisfied with that."

It never occurred to me to wonder what it was like to be Valerian's friend. It sounds like it wasn't so different from being his enemy.

"So it doesn't matter that Valerian wanted to hurt me?" I ask. "So long as he wasn't going to kill me."

“You have to admit, being alive is better,” Cardan returns, that faintly amused tone back in his voice.

I put both of my hands on the desk. “Just tell me why you hate me. Once and for all.”

His long fingers smooth over the wood of Dain’s desk. “You really want honesty?”

“I am the one with the crossbow, not shooting you because you promised me answers. What do you think?”

“Very well.” He fixes me with a spiteful look. “I hate you because your father loves you even though you’re a human brat born to his unfaithful wife, while mine never cared for me, though I am a prince of Faerie. I hate you because you don’t have a brother who beats you. And I hate you because Locke used you and your sister to make Nicasia cry after he stole her from me. Besides which, after the tournament, Balekin never failed to throw you in my face as the mortal who could best me.”

I didn’t think Balekin even knew who I was.

We stare at each other across the desk. Lounging in the chair, Cardan looks every bit the wicked prince. I wonder if he expects to be shot.

“Is that all?” I demand. “Because it’s ridiculous. You can’t be jealous of me. You don’t have to live at the sufferance of the same person who murdered your parents. You don’t have to stay angry because if you don’t, there’s a bottomless well of fear ready to open up under you.” I stop speaking abruptly, surprised at myself.

I said I wasn’t going to be charmed, but I let him trick me into opening up to him.

As I think that, Cardan’s smile turns into a more familiar sneer. “Oh, really? I don’t know about being angry? I don’t know about being afraid? You’re not the one bargaining for your life.”

“That’s really why you hate me?” I demand. “Only that? There’s no better reason?”

For a moment, I think he’s ignoring me, but then I realize he’s not answering because he can’t lie and he doesn’t want to tell me the truth.

“Well?” I say, lifting the crossbow again, glad to have a reason to reassert my position as the person in charge. “Tell me!”

He leans in and closes his eyes. “Most of all, I hate you because I think of you. Often. It’s disgusting, and I can’t stop.”

I am shocked into silence.

“Maybe you should shoot me after all,” he says, covering his face with one long-fingered hand.

“You’re playing me,” I say. I don’t believe him. I won’t fall for some silly trick, because he thinks I am some fool to lose my head over beauty; if I was, I couldn’t last a single day in Faerie. I stand, ready to call his bluff.

Crossbows aren’t great at close range, so I trade mine for a dagger.

He doesn’t look up as I walk around the desk to him. I place the tip of the blade against the bottom of his chin, as I did the day before in the hall, and I tilt his face toward mine. He shifts his gaze with obvious reluctance.

The horror and shame on his face look entirely too real. Suddenly, I am not so sure what to believe.

I lean toward him, close enough for a kiss. His eyes widen. The look in his face is some commingling of panic and desire. It is a heady feeling, having power over someone. Over *Cardan*, who I never thought had any feelings at all.

“You really do want me,” I say, close enough to feel the warmth of his breath as it hitches. “And you *hate* it.” I change the angle of the knife, turning it so it’s against his neck. He doesn’t look nearly as alarmed by that as I might expect.

Not nearly as alarmed as when I bring my mouth to his.

I don’t have a lot of experience with kisses. There was Locke, and before him, no one. But kissing Locke never felt the way that kissing Cardan does, like taking a dare to run over knives, like an adrenaline strike of lightning, like the moment when you’ve swum too far out in the sea and there is no going back, only cold black water closing over your head.

Cardan’s cruel mouth is surprisingly soft, and for a long moment after our lips touch, he’s still as a statue. His eyes close, lashes brushing my cheek. I shudder, as you’re supposed to when someone walks over your grave. Then his hands come up, gentle as they glide over my arms. If I didn’t know better, I’d say his touch was reverent, but I do know better. His hands are moving slowly because he is trying to stop himself. He doesn’t want this. He doesn’t want to want this.

He tastes like sour wine.

I can feel the moment he gives in and gives up, pulling me to him despite the threat of the knife. He kisses me hard, with a kind of devouring desperation, fingers digging into my hair. Our mouths slide together, teeth over lips over tongues. Desire hits me like a kick to the stomach. It’s like fighting, except what we’re fighting for is to crawl inside each other’s skin.

That’s the moment when terror seizes me. What kind of insane revenge is there in exulting in his revulsion? And worse, far worse, *I like this*. I like

everything about kissing him—the familiar buzz of fear, the knowledge I am punishing him, the proof he wants me.

The knife in my hand is useless. I throw it at the desk, barely registering as the point sinks into the wood. He pulls back from me at the sound, startled. His mouth is pink, his eyes dark. He sees the knife and barks out a startled laugh.

Which is enough to make me stagger back. I want to mock him, to show up his weakness without revealing mine, but I don't trust my face not to show too much.

"Is that what you imagined?" I ask, and am relieved to find that my voice sounds harsh.

"No," he says tonelessly.

"Tell me," I say.

He shakes his head, somewhere chagrined. "Unless you're really going to stab me, I think I won't. And I might not tell you even if you were going to stab me."

I get up on Dain's desk to put some distance between us. My skin feels too tight, and the room seems suddenly too small. He almost made me laugh there.

"I am going to make a proposal," Cardan says. "I don't want to put the crown on Balekin's head just to lose mine. Ask whatever you want for yourself, for the Court of Shadows, but ask something for me. Get him to give me lands far from here. Tell him I will be gloriously irresponsible, far from his side. He never needs to think of me again. He can sire some brat to be his heir and pass the High Crown to it. Or perhaps it will slit his throat, a new family tradition. I care not."

I am grudgingly impressed that he's managed to come up with a fairly decent bargain, despite having been tied to a chair for most of the night and probably quite drunk.

"Get up," I tell him.

"So you're not worried I'm going to run for it?" he asks, stretching out his legs. His pointy boots gleam in the room, and I wonder if I should confiscate them since they're potential weapons. Then I remember how bad he is with a sword.

"After our kiss, I am such a fool over you that I can hardly contain myself," I tell him with as much sarcasm as I can muster. "All I want to do

is nice things that make you happy. Sure, I'll make whatever bargain you want, so long as you kiss me again. Go ahead and run. I definitely won't shoot you in the back."

He blinks a few times. "Hearing you lie outright is a bit disconcerting."

"Then let me tell you the truth. You're not going to run because you've got nowhere to go."

I head to the door, flip the lock, and look out. The Bomb is lying on a cot in the sleeping room. The Roach raises his eyebrows at me. The Ghost is passed out in a chair, but he shakes himself awake when we come in. I feel flushed all over and hope I don't look it.

"You done interrogating the princeling?" the Roach asks.

I nod. "I think I know what I've got to do."

The Ghost takes a long look at him. "So are we selling? Buying? Cleaning his guts off the ceiling?"

"I'm going to take a walk," I say. "To get some air."

The Roach sighs.

"I just need to put my thoughts in order," I say. "And then I will explain everything."

"Will you?" the Ghost wants to know, fixing me with a look. I wonder if he guesses how easily promises are coming to my lips. I am spending them like enchanted gold, doomed to turn back into dried leaves in tills all over town.

"I talked with Madoc, and he offered me whatever I wanted in exchange for Cardan. Gold, magic, glory, *anything*. The first part of this bargain is struck, and I haven't even admitted I know where the lost prince might be."

The Ghost's lip curls at the mention of Madoc, but he's silent.

"So what's the holdup?" asks the Roach. "I like all those things."

"I'm just working out the details," I say. "And you need to tell me what you want. Exactly what you want—how much gold, what else. Write it down."

The Roach grunts but doesn't seem inclined to contradict me. He signals with one clawed hand for Cardan to return to the table. The prince staggers, pushing off the wall to get there. I make sure all the sharp things are where I left them, and then I head for the door. When I look back, I see Cardan's hands are deftly splitting the deck of cards, but his glittering black eyes are on me.

I walk to the Lake of Masks and sit on one of the black rocks over the water. The setting sun has lit the sky on fire, set the tops of the trees ablaze.

For a long time, I just sit there, watching the waves lap at the shoreline. I take deep breaths waiting for my mind to settle, for my head to clear. Overhead, I hear the trilling of birds calling to one another as they roost for the night and see glowing lights kindle in hollow knotholes as sprites come awake.

Balekin cannot become the High King, not if there's anything I can do about it. He loves cruelty and hates mortals. He would be a terrible ruler. For now, there are rules dictating our interactions with the human world—those rules could change. What if bargains were no longer needed to steal mortals away? What if anyone could be taken, at any time? It used to be like that; it still is in some places. The High King could make both worlds far worse than they are, could favor the Unseelie Courts, could sow discord and terror for a thousand years.

So, instead, what if I turn Cardan over to Madoc?

He would put Oak on the throne and then rule as a tyrannical and brutal regent. He would make war on the Courts that resisted swearing to the throne. He would raise Oak in enough bloodshed that he would turn into someone like Madoc, or perhaps someone more secretly cruel, like Dain. But he would be better than Balekin. And he would make a fair bargain with me and with the Court of Shadows, if only for my sake. And I—what would I do?

I could go with Vivi, I suppose.

Or I could bargain to be a knight. I could stay and help protect Oak, help insulate him from Madoc's influence. Of course, I would have little power to do that.

What would happen if I cut Madoc out of the picture? That would mean no gold for the Court of Shadows, no bargains with anyone. It would mean getting the crown somehow and putting it on Oak's head. And then what? Madoc would still become regent. I couldn't stop him. Oak would still listen to him. Oak would still become his puppet, still be in danger.

Unless—unless somehow Oak could be crowned and spirited away from Faerie. Be the High King in exile. Once Oak was grown and ready, he could return, aided by the power of the Greenbriar crown. Madoc might still be able to assert some authority over Faerie until Oak got back, but he wouldn't be able to make Oak as bloodthirsty, as inclined toward war. He wouldn't have the absolute authority that he'd have as a regent with the High King beside him. And since Oak would have been reared in the human world, when he came back to Faerie, hopefully he'd be at least somewhat sympathetic to the place where he was raised and the people he met there.

Ten years. If we could keep Oak out of Faerie for ten years, he could grow into the person he's going to be.

Of course, by then, he might have to fight to get his throne back. Someone—probably Madoc, possibly Balekin, maybe even one of the other minor kings or queens—could squat there like a spider, consolidating power.

I squint at the black water. If only there were a way to keep the throne unoccupied for long enough that Oak becomes his own person, without Madoc making war, without any regent at all.

I stand up, having made my decision. For good or ill, I know what I am going to do. I have my plan. Madoc would not approve of this strategy. It's not the kind he likes, where there are multiple ways to win. It's the kind where there's only one way, and it's kind of a long shot.

As I stand, I catch my own reflection in the water. I look again and realize that it can't be me. The Lake of Masks never shows you your own face. I creep closer. The full moon is bright in the sky, bright enough to show me my mother looking back at me. She's younger than I remember her. And she's laughing, calling over someone I cannot see.

Through time, she points at me. When she speaks, I can read her lips. *Look! A human girl.* She appears delighted.

Then Madoc's reflection joins hers, his hand going around her waist. He looks no younger then, but there is an openness in his face that I have never seen. He waves to me.

I am a stranger to them.

Run! I want to shout. But, of course, that's the one thing I don't need to tell her to do.

The Bomb looks up when I enter. She's sitting at the wooden table, measuring out a grayish powder. Beside her are several spun glass globes, corked shut. Her magnificent white hair is tied up with what looks like a piece of dirty string. A smear of grime streaks over her nose.

"The rest of them are in the back," she says. "With the princeling, getting some sleep."

I sit down at the table with a sigh. I'd been tensed up to explain myself, and now all that energy has nowhere to go. "Is there anything around to eat?"

She gives me a quick grin as she fills another globe and sets it gingerly in a basket by her feet. "The Ghost picked up some black bread and butter. We ate the sausages, and the wine's gone, but there might still be some cheese."

I rummage through the cupboard, take out the food, and then eat it mechanically. I pour myself a cup of bracing and bitter fennel tea. It makes me feel a little steadier. I watch her make explosives for a while. As she works, she whistles a little, off-key. It's odd to hear; most of the Folk are musically gifted, but I like her tune better for being imperfect. It seems happier, easier, less haunting.

"Where will you go when all this is done?" I ask her.

She glances over at me, puzzled. "What makes you think I'm going anywhere?"

I frown at my nearly empty cup of tea. "Because Dain's gone. I mean, isn't that what the Ghost and the Roach are going to do? Aren't you going with them?"

The Bomb shrugs her narrow shoulders and points a bare toe at the basket of globes. "See all these?"

I nod.

"They don't travel well," she says. "I'm going to stay here, with you. You've got a plan, right?"

I am too flummoxed to know what to say. I open my mouth and begin to stammer. She laughs. "Cardan said that you did. That if you were just making a trade, you would have done it already. And if you were going to betray us, you'd have done that by now, too."

“But, um,” I say, and then lose my train of thought. Something about how he wasn’t supposed to be paying that much attention. “What do the others think?”

She goes back to filling globes. “They didn’t say, but none of us likes Balekin. If you’ve got a plan, well, good for you. But if you want us on your side, maybe you could be a little less cagey about it.”

I take a deep breath and decide that if I am really going to do this, I could use some help. “What do you think about stealing a crown? Right in front of the kings and queens of Faerie?”

Her grin curls up at the corners. “Just tell me what I get to blow up.”

Twenty minutes later, I light the stub of a candle and make my way to the room with the cots. As the Bomb said, Cardan is stretched out on one, looking sickeningly handsome. He’s washed his face and taken off his jacket, which he has folded up under his head for a pillow. I poke him in the arm, and he comes awake instantly, raising his hand as though to ward me off.

“Shhhh,” I whisper. “Don’t wake the others. I need to talk to you.”

“Go away. You told me you wouldn’t kill me if I answered your questions, and I did.” He doesn’t sound like the boy who kissed me, sick with desire, just hours ago. He sounds sleepy, arrogant, and annoyed.

“I am going to offer you something better than your life,” I say. “Now, come on.”

He stands, shouldering on his jacket, and then follows me into Dain’s office. Once we’re there, he leans against the doorjamb. His eyes are heavy-lidded, his hair messy from the bed. Just looking at him makes me feel hot with shame. “You sure you brought me here just to talk?”

It turns out that having kissed someone, the possibility of kissing hangs over everything, no matter how terrible an idea it was the first time. The memory of his mouth on mine shimmers in the air between us. “I brought you here to make a deal with you.”

His eyebrow goes up. “Intriguing.”

“What if you didn’t have to go hide somewhere in the countryside? What if there were an alternative to Balekin’s being on the throne?” That’s clearly not what he was expecting me to say. For a moment, his insouciant swagger fails him.

“There is,” he says slowly. “*Me*. Except I would be a terrible king, and I would hate it. Besides, Balekin is unlikely to put the crown on my head. He and I have never gotten on particularly well.”

“I thought you lived in his house.” I cross my arms over my chest protectively, trying to push away the image of Balekin punishing Cardan. I can’t have any sympathy now.

He tips his head back, looking at me through dark lashes. “Maybe living together is the reason we don’t get on.”

“I don’t like you, either,” I remind him.

“So you’ve said.” He gives me a lazy grin. “So if it’s not me and it’s not Balekin, then who?”

“My brother, Oak,” I tell him. “I’m not going to go into how, but he’s of the right bloodline. Your bloodline. He can wear the crown.”

Cardan frowns. “You’re sure?”

I nod. I don’t like telling him this before I ask him to do what I need, but there’s little he can do with the knowledge. I will never trade him to Balekin. There is no one to tell but Madoc, and he already knows.

“So Madoc will be regent,” Cardan says.

I shake my head. “That’s why I need your help. I want you to crown Oak the High King, and then I’m going to send him to the mortal world. Let him have a chance to be a kid. Let him have a chance at being a good king someday.”

“Oak might make different choices than the ones you want him to,” Cardan says. “He might, for instance, prefer Madoc to you.”

“I have been a stolen child,” I tell him. “I grew up in a foreign land for a far lonelier and worse reason than this. Vivi will care for him. And if you agree to my plan, I’ll get you everything you asked for and more. But I need something from you—an oath. I want you to swear yourself into my service.”

He barks out the same surprised laugh he made when I threw my knife at the desk. “You want *me* to put *myself* in *your* power? Voluntarily?”

“You don’t think I’m serious, but I am. I couldn’t be more serious.” Inside my crossed arms, I pinch my own skin to prevent any twitches, any tells. I need to seem completely composed, completely confident. My heart is speeding. I feel the way I did when I was a child, playing chess with Madoc—I would see the winning moves ahead of me, forget to be cautious, and then be brought up short by a move of his I hadn’t predicted. I remind myself to breathe, to concentrate.

“Our interests align,” he says. “What do you need my oath for?”

I take a deep breath. “I need to be sure you won’t betray me. You’re too dangerous with the crown in your hands. What if you put it on your brother’s head after all? What if you want it for yourself?”

He seems to think that over. “I’ll tell you exactly what I want—the estates where I live. I want them given to me with everything and everyone in them. Hollow Hall. I want it.”

I nod. “Done.”

“I want every last bottle in the royal cellars, no matter how old or rare.”

“They will be yours,” I say.

“I want the Roach to teach me how to steal,” he says.

Surprised, I don’t answer for a moment. Is he joking? He doesn’t seem to be. “Why?” I ask finally.

“It could come in useful,” he says. “Besides, I like him.”

“Fine,” I say incredulously. “I will find a way to work it out.”

“You really think you can promise all that?” He gives me a considering look.

“I can. I do. And I promise we will thwart Balekin. We will get the crown of Faerie,” I tell him heedlessly. How many promises can I make before I find myself accountable for them? A few more, I hope.

Cardan throws himself into Dain’s chair. From behind the desk, he gazes at me coolly from that position of authority. Something in my gut twists, but I ignore it. I can do this. I can do this. I hold my breath.

“You can have my service for a year and a day,” he says.

“That’s not long enough,” I insist. “I can’t—”

He snorts. “I am sure that your brother will be crowned and gone by then. Or we will have lost, despite your promises, and it won’t matter anyway. You won’t get a better offer from me, especially not if you threaten me again.”

It buys me time, at least. I let out my breath. “Fine. We’re agreed.”

Cardan crosses the room toward me, and I have no idea what he’s going to do. If he kisses me, I am afraid I will be consumed by the hungry and humiliating urgency that I felt the first time. But when he kneels down in front of me, I am too surprised to formulate any thoughts at all. He takes my hand in his, long fingers cool as they curl around mine. “Very well,” he says impatiently, not sounding in the least like a vassal about to swear to his lady. “Jude Duarte, daughter of clay, I swear myself into your service. I will act as your hand. I will act as your shield. I will act in accordance with your will. Let it be so for one year and one day … *and not for one minute more*.”

“You’ve really improved the vow,” I say, although my voice comes out strained. Even as he said the words, I felt like somehow he got the upper hand. Somehow he’s the one in control.

He stands in one fluid motion, letting go of me. “Now what?”

“Go back to bed,” I tell him. “I’ll wake you in a little while and explain what we’ve got to do.”

“As you command,” Cardan says, mocking smile pulling at his mouth. Then he goes back to the room with the cots, presumably to flop down on one. I think about all the strangeness of his being here, sleeping in homespun sheets, wearing the same clothes for days on end, eating bread and cheese, and not complaining about any of it. It almost seems like he prefers a nest of spies and assassins to the splendor of his own bed.

The monarchs of the Seelie and Unseelie Courts, along with the wild unallied faeries who came for the coronation, had made camp on the easternmost corner of the island. They had pitched tents, some in motley, some in diaphanous silks. When I get close, I can see fires burning. Honey wine and spoiled meat perfume the air.

Cardan stands next to me, dressed in flat black, his dark hair combed away from a face scrubbed clean. He looks pale and tired, although I let him sleep as long as I dared.

I didn’t wake up the Ghost or the Roach after Cardan swore his oath. Instead, I talked strategy with the Bomb for the better part of an hour. She is the one who got me the change of clothes for Cardan, the one who agreed he might come in useful. Which is how I came to be here, about to try to find a monarch willing to back a ruler other than Balekin. If my plan is going to succeed, I need someone at that feast who is on the side of a new king, preferably someone with the power to keep a dinner party from devolving into another slaughter if things go sideways.

If nothing else, I’ll need lots of disruptions to be sure I can get Oak out of there. The Bomb’s glass globes aren’t going to be enough. What I’ll have to offer in exchange, I am not entirely sure. I’ve spent all my own promises; now I will begin spending the crown’s.

I take a deep breath. Once I stand in front of the lords and ladies of Faerie and declare my intent to go against Balekin, there's no going back, no crawling under the coverlets in my bed, no running away. If I do this, I am bound to Faerie until Oak sits on the throne.

We have tonight and half of tomorrow before the feast, before I must go to Hollow Hall, before my plans either come together or come entirely apart.

There's only one way to keep Faerie ready for Oak—I have to stay. I have to use what I've learned from Madoc and the Court of Shadows to manipulate and murder my way into keeping the throne ready for him. I said ten years, but perhaps seven will be enough. That's not so long. Seven years of drinking poison, of never sleeping, of living on high alert. Seven more years, and then maybe Faerie will be a safer, better land. And I will have earned my place in it.

The great game, Locke had called it when he accused me of playing it. I wasn't then, but I am now. And maybe I learned something from Locke. He made me into a story, and now I am going to make a story out of someone else.

"So I am to sit here and feed you information," Cardan says, leaning against a hickory tree. "And you're to go charm royalty? That seems entirely backward."

I fix him with a look. "I can be charming. I charmed you, didn't I?"

He rolls his eyes. "Do not expect others to share my depraved tastes."

"I am going to command you," I tell him. "Okay?"

A muscle jumps in his jaw. I am sure it is no small thing for a prince of Faerie to accept being controlled, especially by me, but he nods.

I speak the words. "I command you to stay here and wait until I am ready to leave this forest, there is imminent danger, or a full day has passed. While you wait, I command you to make no sound or signal to draw any others to you. If there is imminent danger or a day has passed without my return, I command you to return to the Court of Shadows, concealing yourself as well as you are able until you are there."

"That is not too poorly done," he tells me, managing to retain his haughty, regal air somehow.

It's annoying.

"Okay," I say. "Tell me what you can about Queen Annet."

What I know is this: She left the coronation ceremony before any of the other lords or ladies. That means she hates either the idea of Balekin or the idea of any High Monarch. I just have to figure out which.

“The Court of Moths is sprawling and very traditionally Unseelie. She’s practical-minded and direct, and she values raw power over other things. I also heard she eats her lovers when she tires of them.” He raises his eyebrows.

Despite myself, I smile. It’s bizarre to be in this with Cardan, of all people. And weirder still for him to talk with me this way, as he might to Nicasia or Locke.

“So why did she walk out of the coronation?” I ask. “It sounds like she and Balekin would be perfect for each other.”

“She has no heirs,” he says. “And despairs of ever bearing one. I think she would not have liked to see the wasteful slaughter of an entire line. Moreover, I don’t think she would be impressed that Balekin killed them all and still left the dais without a crown.”

“Okay,” I say, sucking in a breath.

He grabs hold of my wrist. I am shocked by the sensation of his skin warm against mine. “Take care,” he says, and then smiles. “It would be very dull to have to sit here for an entire day just because you went and got yourself killed.”

“My last thoughts would be of your boredom,” I tell him, and head off toward Queen Annet’s Unseelie encampment.

No fires burn, and the tents are of a rough greenish fabric the color of swamp. The sentries out in front are a troll and a goblin. The troll is wearing armor painted over in some dark color that seems too close to dried blood for comfort.

“Um, hello,” I say, which I realize I need to work on. “I’m a messenger. I need to see the queen.”

The troll peers down at me, obviously surprised to find a human before him.

“And who dares send such a delicious messenger to our Court?” I think he might actually be flattering me, although it’s hard to tell.

“The High King Balekin,” I lie. I figure using his name is the fastest way to get in.

That makes him smile, although not in a friendly way. “What is a king without a crown? That’s a riddle, but one to which we all know the answer: no king at all.”

The other sentry laughs. “We will not let you pass, little morsel. Run back to your master and tell him that Queen Annet does not recognize him, though she appreciates his sense of spectacle. She will not dine with him no matter how many times he asks or what delectable bribes he sends along with his messages.”

“This isn’t what you think,” I say.

“Very well, tarry with us awhile. I bet your bones would crunch sweetly.” The troll is all sharp teeth and mild threat. I know he doesn’t mean it; if he meant it, he would have said something else entirely and just gobbled me up.

Still, I back off. There are guest obligations on everyone who came for the coronation, but guest obligations among the Folk are baroque enough that I am never sure if they protect me or not.

Prince Cardan is waiting for me in the clearing, lying on his back, as though he’s been counting stars.

He looks a question at me, and I shake my head before I slump down in the grass.

“I didn’t even get to talk to her,” I say.

He turns toward me, the moonlight highlighting the planes of his face, the sharpness of his cheekbones, and the points of his ears. “Then you did something wrong.”

I want to snap at him, but he’s right. I messed up. I need to be more formal, more sure that it is my right to be allowed in front of a monarch, as though I am used to it. I practiced everything I would *say* to her but not how I would *get* to her. That part seemed easy. Now I can see that it won’t be.

I lie back beside him and look up at the stars. If I had time, I could make a chart and trace my luck in them. “Fine. If you were me, whom would you apply to?”

“Lord Roiben and the Alderking’s son, Severin.” His face is close to mine.

I frown at him. “But they’re not part of the High Court. They haven’t sworn to the crown.”

“Exactly,” Cardan says, reaching out a finger to trace the shape of my ear. The curve, I realize. I shudder, eyes closing against the hot spike of shame. He keeps talking, but he seems to realize what he’s been doing and snatches his hand away. Now we’re both ashamed. “They have less to lose and more to gain throwing in with a plan that some might call treason. Severin reportedly favors a mortal knight and has a mortal lover, so he’ll speak with you. And his father was in exile, so recognition of his Court itself would be something.

“As for Lord Roiben, the stories make him seem like some figure in a tragedy. A Seelie knight, tortured for decades as a servant in the Unseelie Court he came to rule. I don’t know what you offer someone like that, but he has a big enough Court that if you got him to back Oak, even Balekin would be nervous. Other than that, I know he has a consort he favors, though she is of low rank. Try not to annoy her.”

I remember Cardan drunkenly talking us past the guards on the way out of the coronation. He knows these people, knows their customs. No matter how high-handed he sounds giving advice or how much he bothers me, I would be a fool not to listen. I push myself to my feet, hoping there aren’t hectic spots of red coloring my cheeks. Cardan sits up, too, looking as though he’s about to speak.

“I know,” I say, starting toward the camp. “Don’t bore you by dying.”

I decide to try my luck with the Alderking’s son, Severin, first. His camp is small, as is his domain—a stretch of woods just outside Roiben’s Court of Termites and neither Seelie nor Unseelie in nature.

His tent is made of some heavy cloth, painted in silver and green. A few knights sit nearby around a cheerful fire. None of them are in armor—just heavy leather tunics and boots. One is fussing with a contraption to suspend a kettle over the fire and boil water. The human boy I saw with Severin at the coronation, the redhead who caught me staring, is talking with one of the knights in a low voice. A moment later, they both laugh. No one pays me any notice.

I march up to the fire. “Your pardon,” I say, wondering if even that is too polite for a royal messenger. Still, I have no choice but to barrel on. “I have a message for the Alderking’s son. The new High King wishes to come to an arrangement with him.”

“Oh, really?” The human surprises me by speaking first.

“Yes, mortal,” I say, like the hypocrite I am. But come on, that’s absolutely how one of Balekin’s servants would talk to him.

He rolls his eyes and says something to one of the other knights as he stands. It takes me a moment to realize I am looking at Lord Severin. Hair the color of autumn leaves and moss-green eyes and horns curving from behind his brow to just above his ears. I am surprised at the thought of his sitting with the rest of his retinue before a fire, but I recover quickly enough to remember to bow.

“I must speak with you alone,” I say.

“Oh?” he queries. I do not respond, and his brows rise. “Of course,” he says. “This way.”

“You should fix her,” the human boy calls after us. “Seriously, glamoured human servants are *creepy*.”

Severin doesn’t answer him.

I trail behind him into the tent. None of the others follow, although, when we get inside, there are some women in gowns sitting on cushions and a piper playing a little tune. A female knight sits beside them, her sword across her lap. The blade is beautiful enough to catch my eye.

Severin leads me to a low table surrounded by tufted stools and piled with refreshments—a silver carafe of water with a horn handle, a platter of grapes and apricots, and a dish of little honeyed pastries. He gestures for me to sit, and when I do, he settles himself on another stool.

“Eat whatever you wish,” he says, making it seem like an offer rather than a command.

“I want to ask you to witness a coronation ceremony,” I say, ignoring the food. “But Balekin’s not the one who’s going to be crowned.”

He doesn’t look immensely surprised, just slightly more suspicious. “So you’re *not* his messenger?”

“I am the next High King’s messenger,” I say, taking Cardan’s ring from my pocket as proof that I have some connection to the royal family, that I am not just making up this story from whole cloth. “Balekin isn’t going to be the next High King.”

“I see.” His affect is impassive, but his gaze is drawn to the ring.

“And I can promise you that your Court will be recognized as sovereign, if you help us. No threat of conquest from the new High King. Instead, we offer you an alliance.” Fear crawls up my throat, and I almost can’t say the

last words. If he won't help me, there's some chance he'll betray me to Balekin. If that happens, things get a lot more difficult.

I can control a lot, but I cannot control this.

Severin's face is unreadable. "I am not going to insult you by asking whom you represent. There is only one possibility, the young Prince Cardan, of whom I hear many things. But I am not the ideal candidate to help you, for the very reasons your offer is so tempting. My Court is afforded little consequence. And more, I am the son of a traitor, so my honor is unlikely to be given weight."

"You're going to Balekin's banquet already. All I need from you is aid at the critical moment." He's tempted, he admitted as much. Maybe he just needs some more convincing. "Whatever you've heard about Prince Cardan, he will make a better king than his brother."

At least there I am not lying.

Severin glances toward the edge of the tent, as though wondering who can overhear me. "I will help you so long as I am not the only one. I say this as much for your sake as for mine." With that, he stands. "I wish you and the prince well. If you need me, I will do what I can."

I get up off the stool and bow again. "You are most generous."

As I leave his camp, my mind whirls. On one hand, I did it. I managed to speak with one of the rulers of Faerie without making a fool of myself. I even kind of persuaded him to go along with my plan. But I still need another monarch, a more influential one, to agree.

There is one place I have been avoiding. The largest camp belongs to Roiben of the Court of Termites. Notoriously bloodthirsty, he won both of his crowns in battle, so he has no reason to object to Balekin's blood-soaked coup. Still, Roiben seems to feel much the way Annet of the Court of Moths does, that Balekin is of little consequence without a crown.

Maybe he won't want to see one of Balekin's messengers, either. And, given the size of his encampment, I can't even imagine the number of guardians I would have to pass in order to speak with him.

But possibly I could sneak in. After all, with so many of the Folk around, what is one person more or less?

I gather up a bundle of fallen branches, large enough to be a respectable contribution to a fire, and walk toward the Termite Camp with my head

down. There are knights posted around the perimeter, but, indeed, they pay me little mind as I walk past.

I feel giddy with the success of my plan. When I was a child, sometimes Madoc would have to stop in the middle of a game of Nine Men's Morris. The board would remain as it was, waiting for us to resume. All through the day and the night, I would imagine my moves and his countermoves until, when we sat down, we were no longer playing the original game. Most often what I failed to do was accurately anticipate his next moves. I had a great strategy for me, but not for the game I was in.

That's how I feel now, walking into the camp. I am playing a game opposite Madoc, and while I can spin out plans and schemes, if I can't accurately guess his, I am sunk.

I drop the kindling beside a fire. A blue-skinned woman with black teeth regards me for a moment and then goes back to her conversation with a goat-footed man. Dusting the bark from my clothes, I walk toward the largest tent. I keep my step light and my stride easy and even. When I find a patch of shadow, I use it to crawl under the edge of the cloth. For a moment, I lie there, half hidden on both sides and completely hidden on neither.

The inside of the main tent is lit with lanterns burning with green alchemical fire, tinting everything a sickly color. In every other way, however, the interior is lush. Carpets are layered, one over another. There are heavy wooden tables, chairs, and a bed piled with furs and brocade coverlets stitched with pomegranates.

But on the table, to my surprise, are paper cartons of food. The green-skinned pixie who was with Roiben at the coronation uses chopsticks to bring noodles to her mouth. He sits beside her, carefully breaking apart a fortune cookie.

"What does it say?" the girl asks. "How about 'the trip you told your girlfriend would be fun ended in bloodshed, as usual.' "

"It says, 'Your shoes will make you happy today,' " he tells her, voice dry, and passes the little slip across the table for her verification.

She glances down at his leather boots. He shrugs, a small smile touching his lips.

Then I'm dragged roughly out from my hiding place. I roll onto my back outside the tent to find a knight standing above me, her sword drawn. There is no one to blame but myself. I should have kept moving, should have

found a way to hide myself inside the tent. I should not have stopped to listen to a conversation, no matter how surprising I found it.

“Get up,” the knight says. Dulcamara. Her face shows no recognition of me, however.

I stand, and she marches me into the tent, kicking me in the legs once we get there so I topple onto the rugs. I have cause to be thankful for their plushness. For a moment, I let myself lie there. She presses her boot against the small of my back as though I am some felled prey.

“I caught a spy,” she announces. “Shall I snap its neck?”

I could roll over and grab her ankle. That would throw her off balance for long enough that I could get up. If I twisted her leg and ran, I might be able to get away. At worst, I’d be on my feet, able to grab a weapon and fight her.

But I came here to have an audience with Lord Roiben, and now I have one. I stay still and let Dulcamara underestimate me.

Lord Roiben has come around from the table and bends over me, white hair falling around his face. Silver eyes regard me pitilessly. “And whose Court are you a part of?”

“The High King’s,” I say. “The true High King, Eldred, who was felled by his son.”

“I am not sure I believe you.” He surprises me both with the mildness of the statement and with the assumption that I am lying. “Come, sit with us and eat. I would hear more of your tale. Dulcamara, you may leave us.”

“You’re going to feed it?” she asks sulkily.

He does not answer her, and after a moment of stony silence, she seems to remember herself. With a bow, she leaves.

I go to the table. The pixie regards me with her inkdrop-black eyes, like Tatterfell’s. I notice the extra joint in her fingers as she reaches for an eggroll. “Go ahead,” she says. “There’s plenty. I used most of the hot mustard packets, though.”

Roiben waits, watching me.

“Mortal food,” I say, in what I hope is a neutral way.

“We live alongside mortals, do we not?” he asks me.

“I think *she* more than lives *beside* them,” the pixie objects, looking at me.

“Your pardon,” he says, and waits. I realize they really expect me to eat something. I spear a dumpling with a single chopstick and stuff it into my mouth. “It’s good.”

The pixie resumes eating noodles.

Roiben gestures to her. “This is Kaye. I imagine you know who I am since you snuck into my camp. What name might you go by?”

I am unused to such scrupulous politeness being afforded to me—he’s doing me the courtesy of not asking for my true name. “Jude,” I say, because names have no power over mortals. “And I came to see you because I can put someone other than Balekin on the throne, but I need your help to do it.”

“Someone better than Balekin or just someone?” he asks.

I frown, not sure how to answer that. “Someone who didn’t murder most of his family onstage. Isn’t that automatically better?”

The pixie—*Kaye*—snorts.

Lord Roiben looks down at his hand, on the wooden table, then back at me. I cannot read his grim face. “Balekin is no diplomat, but perhaps he can learn. He’s obviously ambitious, and he pulled off a brutal coup. Not everyone has the stomach for that.”

“I almost didn’t have the stomach to watch it,” Kaye says.

“He only sort of pulled it off,” I remind them. “And I didn’t think you liked him very much, given what you said at the coronation.”

A corner of Roiben’s mouth turns up. It is a gesture in miniature, barely noticeable. “I don’t. I think he’s a coward to kill his sisters and father in what appeared to be a fit of pique. And he hid behind his military, letting his general finish off the High King’s chosen heir. That bespeaks weakness, the kind that will inevitably be exploited.”

A cold chill of premonition shivers up my back. “What I need is someone to witness a coronation, someone with enough power that the witnessing will matter. You. It will happen at Balekin’s feast, tomorrow eve. If you’ll just allow it to happen and give your oath to the new High King—”

“No offense,” Kaye says, “but what do you have to do with any of this? Why do you care who gets the throne?”

“Because this is where I live,” I say. “This is where I grew up. Even if I hate it half the time, it’s mine.”

Lord Roiben nods slowly. “And you are not going to tell me who this candidate is nor how you’re going to get a crown on his head?”

“I’d rather not,” I say.

“I could get Dulcamara to hurt you until you begged to be allowed to tell me your secrets.” He says this mildly, just another fact, but it reminds me of just how horrific his reputation is. No amount of takeout Chinese food or politeness ought to make me forget exactly who and what I am dealing with.

“Wouldn’t that make you as much of a coward as Balekin?” I ask, trying to project the same confidence I did in the Court of Shadows, the same confidence I did with Cardan. I can’t let him see that I’m scared or, at least, not *how* scared I am.

We study each other for a long moment, the pixie watching us both. Finally, Lord Roiben lets out a long breath. “Probably more of a coward. Very well, Jude, kingmaker. We will gamble with you. Put the crown on a head other than Balekin’s and I will help you keep it there.” He pauses. “But you will do something for me.”

I wait, tense.

He steeples his long fingers. “Someday, I will ask your king for a favor.”

“You want me to agree to something without even knowing what it is?” I blurt out.

His stoic face gives little away. “Now we understand each other exactly.”

I nod. What choice do I have? “Something of equal value,” I clarify. “And within our power.”

“This has been a most interesting meeting,” Lord Roiben says with a small, inscrutable smile.

As I stand to leave, Kaye winks an inkdrop eye at me. “Luck, mortal.”

With her words echoing after me, I leave the encampments and head back to Cardan.

The Ghost is up when we return. He had been out and brought back with him a handful of tiny apples, some dried venison, fresh butter, and several dozen more bottles of wine. He's also brought down a few pieces of furniture I recognize from the palace—a silk-embroidered divan, satin cushions, a shimmering spider-silk throw, and a chalcedony set of tea things.

He looks up from the divan where he is sitting, appearing both tense and exhausted. I think he's grieving, but not in a human way. "Well? I believe I was promised gold."

"What if I could promise you revenge?" I ask, conscious once again of the weight of debts already on my shoulders.

He trades a look with the Bomb. "So she really does have a scheme."

The Bomb settles herself on a cushion. "A secret, which is far better than a scheme."

I grab an apple, go to the table, and then hoist myself onto it. "We're going to walk right into Balekin's feast and steal his kingdom out from under him. How's that for vengeance?"

Bold, that's what I need to be. Like I own the place. Like I am the general's daughter. Like I can really pull this off.

The corner of the Ghost's mouth turns up. He takes out four silver cups from the cupboard and sets them before me. "Drink?"

I shake my head, watching him pour. He returns to the divan but rests at the edge as though he's going to have to jump up in a moment. He takes a big swallow of wine.

"You spoke of the murder of Dain's unborn child," I say.

The Ghost nods. "I saw your face when Cardan spoke of Liriope and when you understood my part in it."

"It surprised me," I say honestly. "I wanted to think Dain was different."

Cardan snorts and takes the silver cup that was meant for me as well as his own.

"Murder is a cruel trade," says the Ghost. "I believe Dain would have been as fair a High King as any prince of the Folk, but my father was mortal. He would not have considered Dain to be good. He would not have considered me good, either. You'd do well to decide how much you care for goodness before you go too far down the road of spycraft."

He's probably right, but there's little time for me to consider it now. "You don't understand," I tell him. "Liriope's child lived."

He turns to the Bomb, clearly astonished. "*That's* the secret?"

She nods, a little smug. "That's the scheme."

The Ghost gives her a long look and then turns his gaze to me. "I don't want to find a new position. I want to stay here and serve the next High King. So, yes, let's steal the kingdom."

"We don't need to be good," I tell the Ghost. "But let's try to be fair. As fair as any prince of Faerie."

The Ghost smiles.

"And maybe a little fairer," I say with a look at Cardan.

The Ghost nods. "I'd like that."

Then he goes to wake the Roach. I have to explain all over again. Once I get to the part about the banquet and what I think is going to happen, the Roach interrupts me so many times I can barely get a sentence out. After I'm done speaking, he removes a roll of vellum and a nibbed pen from one of the cabinets and notes down who ought to be where at what point for the plan to work.

"You're replanning my plan," I say.

“Just a little,” he says, licking the nib and beginning to write again. “Are you concerned over Madoc? He won’t like this.”

Of course I am concerned about Madoc. If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be doing any of this. I would just hand him the living key to the kingdom.

“I know,” I say, gazing at the dregs of wine in the Ghost’s glass. The moment I walk into the feast with Cardan on my arm, Madoc will know I am running a game of my own. When he discovers that I am going to cheat him out of being regent, he’ll be furious.

And he’s at his most bloodthirsty when he’s furious.

“Do you have something appropriate to wear?” the Roach asks. At my surprised look, he throws up his hands. “You’re playing politics. You and Cardan need to be turned out in splendor for this banquet. Your new king will need everything to look right.”

We go over the plans again, and Cardan helps us map out Hollow Hall. I try not to be too conscious of his long fingers tracing over the paper, of the sick thrill I get when he looks at me.

At dawn, I drink three cups of tea and set out alone for the last person I must speak with before the banquet, my sister Vivienne.

I go back to my house—Madoc’s house, I remind myself, never really mine, never mine again after tonight—as the sun rises in a blaze of gold. I feel like a shadow as I climb the spiral stairs, as I pass through all the rooms I grew up in. In my bedroom, I pack a bag. Poison, knives, a gown, and jewels that I think the Roach will find to be properly extravagant. With reluctance, I leave behind the stuffed animals from my bed. I leave slippers and books and favorite baubles. I step out of my second life the same way I stepped out of my first, holding too few things and with great uncertainty about what will happen next.

Then I go to Vivi’s door. I rap softly. After a few moments, she sleepily lets me inside.

“Oh good,” she mumbles, yawning. “You’re packed.” Then she catches sight of my face and shakes her head. “Please don’t tell me you’re not coming.”

“Something happened,” I say, resting my bag on the ground. I keep my voice low. There is no real reason to hide that I am here, but hiding has become habit. “Just hear me out.”

“You disappeared,” she says. “I’ve been waiting and waiting for you, trying to act like things were fine in front of Dad. You made me worry.”

“I know,” I say.

She looks at me like she’s considering giving me a swift smack. “I was afraid you were *dead*.”

“I’m not even a little bit dead,” I say, taking her arm and pulling her close so I can speak in a whisper. “But I have to tell you something I know you’re not going to like: I have been working as a spy for Prince Dain. He put me under a geas so I couldn’t have said anything before his death.”

Her delicately pointed eyebrows rise. “Spying? What does that entail?”

“Sneaking around and getting information. Killing people. And before you say anything else, I was good at it.”

“O*kay*,” she says. She knew something was up with me, but from her face, I can tell that in a million years she wouldn’t have guessed this.

I go on. “And I discovered that Madoc is going to make a political move, one that involves Oak.” I explain once more about Liriope and Oriana and Dain. By this point, I have told this story enough that it’s easy to hit only the necessary parts, to run through the information quickly and convincingly. “Madoc is going to make Oak king and himself regent. I don’t know if that was always his plan, but I am sure it’s his plan now.”

“And that’s why you’re not coming to the human world with me?”

“I want you to take Oak instead,” I tell her. “Keep him away from all this until he gets a little older, old enough not to need a regent. I’ll stay here and make sure he has something to come back to.”

Vivi puts her hands on her hips, a gesture that reminds me of our mother. “And how exactly are you going to do that?”

“Leave that part to me,” I say, wishing that Vivi didn’t know me quite as well as she does. To distract her, I explain about Balekin’s banquet, about how the Court of Shadows is going to help me get the crown. I am going to need her to prep Oak for the coronation. “Whoever controls the king, controls the kingdom,” I say. “If Madoc is regent, you know that Faerie will always be at war.”

“So let me get this straight: You want me to take Oak away from Faerie, away from everyone he knows, and teach him how to be a good king?” She laughs mirthlessly. “Our mother once stole a faerie child away—me. You know what happened. How will this be any different? How will you keep Madoc and Balekin from hunting Oak to the ends of the earth?”

“Someone can be sent to guard him, to guard all of you—but, as for the rest, I have a plan. Madoc won’t follow.” With Vivi, I feel forever doomed to be the little sister, foolish and about to topple over onto my face.

“Maybe I don’t want to play nursemaid,” Vivi says. “Maybe I will lose him in a parking garage or forget him at school. Maybe I would teach him awful tricks. Maybe he would blame me for all this.”

“Give me another solution. You really think this is what I want?” I know I sound like I am pleading with her, but I can’t help it.

For a tense moment, we look at each other. Then she sits down hard in a chair and lets her head fall back against the cushion. “How am I going to explain this to Heather?”

“I think Oak is the least shocking part of what you have to tell her,” I say. “And it’s just for a few years. You’re immortal. Which, by the way, is one of the more shocking things you have to tell her.”

She gives me a glare fit to singe hair. “Make me a promise that this is going to save Oak’s life.”

“I promise,” I tell her.

“And make me another promise that it’s not going to cost you yours.”

I nod. “It won’t.”

“Liar,” she says. “You’re a dirty liar and I hate it and I hate this.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I know.”

At least she didn’t say she hated me, too.

I am on my way out of the house when Taryn opens her bedroom door. She’s dressed in a skirt the color of ivy, with stitching picking out a pattern of falling leaves.

My breath catches. I wasn’t planning to see her.

We regard each other for a long moment. She takes in that there's a bag over my shoulder and that I'm in the same clothes I wore when we fought.

Then she closes her door again, leaving me to my fate.

Never have I walked through the front doors of Hollow Hall. Always before I have come skulking through the kitchens, dressed as a servant. Now I stand in front of the polished wood doors, lit by two lamps of trapped sprites who fly in desperate circles. They illuminate a carving of an enormous and sinister face. The knocker, a circle piercing its nose.

Cardan reaches for it, and because I have grown up in Faerie, I am not entirely surprised into a scream when the door's eyes open.

"My prince," it says.

"My door," he says in return, with a smile that conveys both affection and familiarity. It's bizarre to see his obnoxious charm used for something other than evil.

"Hail and welcome," the door says, swinging open to reveal one of Balekin's faerie servants. He stares openmouthed at Cardan, missing prince of Faerie. "The other guests are through there," the servant finally manages.

Cardan tucks my arm firmly through his before striding into the entryway, and I feel a rush of warmth as I match his step. I can't afford to be less than ruthlessly honest with myself. Against my better judgment, despite the fact that he is terrible, Cardan is also fun.

Maybe I should be glad of how little it will matter.

But for now, it's immensely unnerving. Cardan is dressed in a suit of Dain's clothes, stolen from the palace wardrobes and altered by a clever-fingered brownie that owed the Roach a gambling debt. He looks regal in different shades of cream—a coat over a vest and loose shirt, breeches and a neckcloth, with the same silver-tipped boots he wore to the coronation, a single sapphire shining from his left ear. He's *supposed* to look regal. I helped choose the clothes, helped make him this way, and yet the effect is not lost on me.

I am wearing a bottle-green gown with earrings in the shape of berries. In my pocket is Liriope's golden acorn, and at my hip is my father's sword. Against my skin, I have a collection of knives. It doesn't feel like enough.

As we cross the floor, everyone turns to look. The lords and ladies of Faerie. Kings and queens of other Courts. The representative from the Queen of the Undersea. Balekin. My family. Oak, standing with Oriana and Madoc. I look over at Lord Roiben, his white hair making him easy to find in the crowd, but he does not acknowledge that we have ever met. His face remains unreadable, a mask.

I am going to have to trust that he will keep his part of the bargain, but I mislike this kind of calculation. I grew up thinking of strategy as finding weaknesses and exploiting them. That I understand. But making people like you, making people want to take your part and be on your side—that I am far less skilled at.

My gaze goes from a table of refreshments to the elaborate gowns to a goblin king crunching on a bone. Then my eyes settle on the Blood Crown of the High King. It rests on a ledge above us, a pillow beneath it. There, it glows with a sinister light.

At the sight, I imagine all my plans coming apart. The thought of stealing it, in front of everyone, daunts me. And yet, having to search Hollow Hall for it would have been daunting, too.

I see Balekin move from speaking with a woman I don't recognize. She's wearing a gown of woven seaweed and a collar of pearls. Her black hair is tied to a crown festooned with more pearls, appearing like webbing above her head. It takes me a moment to puzzle out who she must be—Queen Orlagh, Nicasia's mother. Balekin leaves her and crosses the room toward us with purpose.

Cardan catches sight of Balekin and steers us in the direction of the wine. Bottles and carafes of it—pale green, yellow as gold, the dark purple-red of my heart's own blood. They are redolent of roses, of dandelions, of crushed herbs and currants. The smell alone nearly makes my head spin.

"Little brother," Balekin says to Cardan. He is dressed head to toe in black and silver, the velvet of his doublet so thickly embroidered with patterns of crowns and birds that it looks as heavy as armor. He wears a silver circlet on his brow, matching his eyes. It's not *the* crown, but it is *a* crown. "I've sought high and low for you."

"Doubtless so." Cardan smiles like the villain I've always believed him to be. "I turned out to be useful after all. What a terrible surprise."

Prince Balekin smiles back as though their smiles could duel without the rest of them even being involved. I am sure he wishes he could rail at Cardan, could beat him into doing what he wants, but since the rest of their family died at swordpoint, Balekin must have learned his lesson about needing a willing participant in a coronation.

For the moment, Cardan's presence is enough to reassure people that Balekin will soon be the High King. If Balekin calls for guards or grabs him, that illusion will dissipate.

"And you," Balekin says, turning his gaze to me, viciousness lighting his eyes. "What have you to do with this? Leave us."

"Jude," Madoc says, striding up to stand beside Prince Balekin, who immediately seems to realize I might have *something* to do with this after all.

Madoc looks displeased but not alarmed. I am sure he is thinking me a fool who expects to get a pat on the head for finding the missing prince and cursing himself for not making it more clear that he wanted Cardan brought to *him* and *not* to Balekin. I give him my best blithe smile, like a girl who thinks she has solved everyone's problems.

How frustrating it must be to come so close to your goal, to have Oak and the crown in one place, to have the lords and ladies of Faerie assembled. And then your first wife's bastard throws a spanner in the works by handing the one person most likely to put the crown on Oak's head to your rival.

I note the evaluating look he's giving Cardan, however. He's replanning.

He rests a heavy hand on my shoulder. “You found him.” He turns to Balekin. “I hope you’re intending to reward my daughter. I am sure it took no small amount of persuasion to bring him here.”

Cardan gives Madoc an odd look. I remember what he said about it bothering him that Madoc treated me so well when Eldred barely acknowledged him. But the way he’s looking, I wonder if it’s just weird to see us together, redcap general and human girl.

“I will give her anything she asks for and more,” Balekin promises extravagantly. I see Madoc frown, and I give him a quick smile, pouring two glasses of wine—one light and the other dark. I am careful with them, sly-fingered. I do not spill a drop.

Instead of handing one to Cardan, I offer them both up for Madoc to choose between. Smiling, he takes the one the color of heart’s blood. I take the other.

“To the future of Faerie,” I say, tapping the globes together, making the glass ring like bells. We drink. Immediately, I feel the effects—a kind of floatiness, as though I am swimming through air. I don’t want to even look at Cardan. He will laugh and laugh if he thinks I can’t handle a few sips of wine.

Cardan pours his own glass and throws it back.

“Take the bottle,” Balekin says. “I am prepared to be very generous. Let us discuss what you’d like, whatever you’d like.”

“There’s no hurry, is there?” Cardan asks lazily.

Balekin gives him the hard stare of someone barely holding himself back from violence. “I think everyone would like to see the matter settled.”

“Nonetheless,” Cardan says, taking the bottle of wine and drinking directly from the neck. “We have all night.”

“The power is in your hands,” Balekin tells him in a clipped way that leaves the “for now” heavily implied.

I see a muscle twitch in Cardan’s jaw. I am sure Balekin is imagining how he will punish Cardan for any delay. It weighs down his every word.

Madoc, by contrast, is taking in the situation, evaluating, no doubt, what he can offer Cardan. When he smiles at me and takes another swig of his wine, it’s a real smile. Toothy and relieved. I can see he’s thinking that Cardan will be easier to manipulate than Balekin ever would have been.

I am suddenly certain that if we went into the other room, Balekin would find Madoc's sword buried in his chest.

"After dinner, I will tell you my terms," Cardan says. "But until then, I am going to enjoy the party."

"I do not have endless patience," Balekin growls.

"Cultivate it," Cardan says, and with a small bow, he navigates us away from Balekin and Madoc.

I leave my glass of wine near a platter of sparrow hearts, pierced through with long silver pins, and weave through the crowd with him.

Nicasia stops us with a long-fingered hand against Cardan's chest, her cerulean hair bright against her bronze gown.

"Where have you been?" Nicasia asks with a glance at our linked arms. She wrinkles her delicate nose, but panic underlines her words. She is feigning calm, like the rest of us.

I am sure that she thought Cardan had to be dead, or worse. There must be many things she wants to ask him, all of which she cannot do in front of me.

"Jude here made me her prisoner," he says, and I have to fight down the urge to step heavily on his foot. "She ties very tight knots."

Nicasia clearly doesn't know whether to laugh. I almost sympathize. I don't know, either.

"Good thing you finally managed to slip her bonds," Nicasia decides on.

He raises both brows. "Did I?" he asks with a haughty condescension, as though she has shown herself to be less clever than he had hoped.

"Must you be like this, even now?" she asks, clearly deciding to throw caution to the wind. Her hand goes to his arm.

His face softens in a way that I am entirely unused to seeing. "Nicasia," he says, pulling himself free. "Stay away from me tonight. For your own sake."

It stings a little, that he has that kindness in him. I don't want to see it.

She gives me a look, doubtlessly trying to decide why his pronouncement doesn't apply to me. But then Cardan is moving away from her, and I go with him. I see Taryn across the room, Locke beside her. Her eyes widen, taking in whom I am standing with. Something passes over her face, and it looks a lot like resentment.

She has Locke, but I am here with a *prince*.

That’s not fair. I cannot know she is thinking that from just one look.

“Part one completed,” I say, looking away from her. Speaking to Cardan under my breath. “We got here, got in, and are not yet in chains.”

“Yes,” he says. “I believe the Roach called that ‘the easy bit.’ ”

The plan, as I’ve explained it to him, has five basic phases: (1) get in, (2) get everybody else in, (3) get the crown, (4) put the crown on Oak’s head, and (5) get out.

I take my arm from his. “Don’t go anywhere alone,” I remind Cardan.

He gives me the tight-lipped smile of someone who’s being abandoned and nods once.

I head toward Oriana and Oak. On the other side of the room, I see Severin break off from a conversation and walk toward Prince Balekin. Sweat beads on my lip, under my arms. My muscles tense.

If Severin says the wrong thing, I am going to have to abandon all phases of the plan except for “get out.”

Oriana raises both brows as I approach, her hands going to Oak’s thin shoulders. He reaches up his hands. I want to swing him up into my arms. I want to ask him if Vivi explained what’s going to happen. I want to tell him everything’s going to be fine. But Oriana grabs his fingers, pressing them between hers, settling the question of how many lies I could stomach.

“What is this?” Oriana asks me with a nod toward Cardan.

“What you asked,” I tell her, following her gaze. Somehow, Balekin has drawn Cardan into his conversation with Severin. Cardan laughs at something Balekin said, looking as comfortably arrogant as I’ve ever seen him. I am shocked by recognition—if you live your life always afraid, always with danger on your heels, it is not so difficult to pretend away more danger. I know that, but I didn’t think, of all people, Cardan would, too. Balekin has his hand on Cardan’s shoulder. I can just imagine his fingers digging into Cardan’s neck. “It’s not easy. I hope you understand there’s going to be a price—”

“I’ll pay it,” she says quickly.

“None of us knows the cost,” I snap, and then hope no one notices the sharpness of my tone. “And we’re all going to have to pay our share.”

My skin has a fine flush on it from the wine, and there’s a metallic taste in my mouth. It’s nearly time to put the next part of the plan into effect. I

glance around for Vivi, but she's across the room. There's no time to say anything to her now, even if I knew what to say.

I give Oak what I hope is an encouraging smile. I have often wondered if my past is the reason I am the way I am, if it has made me monstrous. If so, will I make a monster out of him?

Vivi won't, I tell myself. Her job is to help him care about things other than power, and my job is to care only about power so I can carve out room for his return. With a deep breath, I head toward the doors out into the hallway. I pass the pair of knights and turn a corner, out of their sight line. I gulp down a few breaths before unlatching the windows.

I wait a few hopeful moments. If the Roach and the Ghost climb through, I can explain the crown's location. But, instead, the doors to the banquet open, and I hear Madoc order the knights off. I move so that he can see me. When he does, he comes toward me with purpose. "Jude. I thought you came this way."

"I needed some fresh air," I tell him, which is indicative of how nerved up I am. I have answered the question he hasn't yet asked.

He waves it off, though. "You should have come to me first when you found Prince Cardan. We could have negotiated from a position of strength."

"I thought you might say something like that," I tell him.

"What matters now is that I need to speak with him alone. I'd like you to go inside and bring him out here, so we can talk. All three of us can talk."

I move away from the window, into the open space of the hall. The Ghost and the Roach will be here in a moment, and I don't want Madoc to spot them. "About Oak?" I ask.

As I had hoped, Madoc follows me away from the window, frowning. "You knew?"

"That you have a plan for ruling Elfhame yourself?" I ask him. "I figured it out."

He stares at me as though I am a stranger, but I have never felt less like one. For the first time, we are both unmasked.

"And yet you brought Prince Cardan here, right to Balekin," he says. "Or to me? Is that it? Are we to bargain now?"

"It must be one or the other, right?" I say.

He’s growing angry. “Would you prefer no High King at all? If the crown is destroyed, there will be war, and if there’s war, I will win it. One way or another, I will have that crown, Jude. And you stand to benefit when I do. There’s no reason to oppose me. You can have your knighthood. You can have all the things you’ve ever dreamed of.” He takes another step toward me. We are in striking distance of each other.

“You said, ‘I will have that crown.’ *You*,” I remind him, my hand going to the hilt of my sword. “You’ve barely spoken Oak’s name. He is just a means to an end, and that end is power. Power for you.”

“Jude—” he begins, but I cut him off.

“I’ll make a bargain. Swear to me that you’ll never raise a hand against Oak, and I’ll help. Promise me that when he comes of age, you will immediately step down as regent. You’ll give him whatever power you’ll have amassed, and you’ll do it willingly.”

Madoc’s mouth twists. His hands fist. I know he loves Oak. He loves me. I’m sure he loved my mother, too, in his own way. But he is who and what he is. I know he cannot promise.

I draw my sword, and he does, too, the scrape of metal loud in the room. I hear distant laughter, but here in the hall, we are alone.

My hands are sweating, but this has the feeling of inevitability, as though this is what I was careening toward the whole time, my whole life.

“You can’t beat me,” Madoc says, moving into a fighting stance.

“I already have,” I say.

“You have no way to win.” Madoc flicks his blade, encouraging me to come toward him, as though this is just some practice bout. “What can you hope to do with one missing prince, here in Balekin’s stronghold? I will knock you down, and then I will take him from you. You could have had anything you wanted, but now you will be left with nothing.”

“Oh, yes, let me tell you my whole plan. You’ve goaded me right into it.” I make a face. “Let’s not stall anymore. This is the part where we fight.”

“At least you’re no coward.” He rushes at me with such force that even though I block the blow, I am thrown to the floor. I roll into a standing position, but I am shaken. He has never fought me like this, full out. This will be no genteel exchange of blows.

He’s the High King’s general. I knew he was better than me, but not how much better.

I cheat a glance toward the window. I can't be stronger than him, but I don't need to be. I just need to keep on my feet a little while longer. I strike out, hoping to catch him by surprise. He knocks me back again. I dodge and turn, but he expects the blow, and I have to stumble inelegantly back, blocking yet another heavy chop of his blade. My arms hurt from the strength behind his blows.

This is all happening too fast.

I come in with a series of techniques he's taught me and then use a bit of swordplay I learned from the Ghost. I feign left and then land a clever slice to his side. It's a shallow hit, but it surprises us both when a line of red wets his coat. He thrusts toward me. I jump to one side, and he elbows me in the face, knocking me back to the ground. Blood gushes over my mouth from my nose.

I push myself dizzily to my feet.

I'm scared, no matter how I try to play it off. I was arrogant. I am trying to buy time, but one of his blows could split me in half.

"Surrender," he tells me, sword pointed toward my throat. "It was well tried. I will forgive you, Jude, and we will go back into the banquet. You will persuade Cardan to do what I need him to. All will be as it should be."

I spit blood on the stone tiles.

His sword arm trembles a little.

"*You* surrender," I say.

He laughs, as though I have told a particularly rich joke. Then he stops, grimacing.

"I imagine you're not feeling quite yourself," I tell him.

His sword sags a little, and he looks at me in sudden comprehension. "What have you done?"

"I poisoned you. Don't worry. It was a small enough dose. You'll live."

"The cups of wine," he says. "But how did you know which one I would choose?"

"I didn't," I tell him, thinking that he'll be at least a little pleased by the answer, despite himself. It is the kind of strategy he likes best. "I poisoned them both."

"You will be very sorry," he says. The tremble is in his legs now. I know. I feel the echo of it in my own. But by now, I am used to drinking poison.

I look deep into his eyes as I sheathe my sword. “Father, I am what you made me. I’ve become your daughter after all.”

Madoc lifts his blade again, as though he’s going to rush at me one final time. But then it falls from his hand, and he falls, too, sprawling on the stone floor.

When the Ghost and the Roach come in, a few tense minutes later, they find me sitting beside him, too tired to even think of moving his body.

Wordlessly, the Roach hands me a handkerchief, and I start to wipe the blood from my nose.

“On to phase three,” the Ghost says.

When I rejoin the feast, everyone is taking their place at the long table. I walk straight to Balekin and curtsy.

"My lord," I say, pitching my voice low. "Madoc asked me to tell you that he is delayed and to begin without him. He wishes you not to worry, but some of Dain's spies are here. He will send you word when he's caught or killed them."

Balekin regards me with slightly pursed lips and narrowed eyes. He takes in whatever traces of blood I couldn't wash from my nostrils and my teeth, whatever sweat I couldn't wipe away. Madoc slumbers in Cardan's old room, and by my calculations, we have at least an hour before he wakes. It feels as though if Balekin looked carefully, he could see that on my face, too.

"You have been more helpful than I would have guessed," Balekin says, resting a hand lightly on my shoulder. He seems to have forgotten how furious he was when I first came in with Cardan and expects me to forget it, too. "Continue and you will find yourself rewarded. Would you like to live as one of us? Would you like to *be* one of us?"

Could the High King of Faerie really give me that? Could he make me something other than human, something other than mortal?

I think of Valerian's words when he tried to glamour me into jumping out of the tower. *Being born mortal is like being born already dead.*

He sees the look on my face and smiles, sure that he has ferreted out the secret desire of my heart.

And, indeed, as I walk to my seat, I am troubled. I should feel triumphant, but, instead, I feel sick. Outmaneuvering Madoc wasn't nearly as satisfying as I wanted it to be, especially since I was able to do it because he never thought of me as someone who would betray him. Perhaps years from now, my faith in this plan will prove justified, but until then I will have to live with this acid in the pit of my stomach.

The future of Faerie depends on my playing a long game and playing it perfectly.

I spot Vivi, sitting between Nicasia and Lord Severin, and I give her a quick smile. She gives me a grim one in return.

Lord Roiben looks at me askance. Beside him, the green pixie whispers something in his ear, and he shakes his head. At the other end of the table, Locke kisses Taryn's hand. Queen Orlagh looks over at me curiously. There are only three mortals here—Taryn, me, and the redhead with Severin—and from the way she regards us, Orlagh is imagining mice presiding over a convocation of cats.

Above hangs a chandelier made from thin sheets of mica. Tiny glowing faeries are trapped inside for the purpose of adding a warm glow to the room. Occasionally, they fly, making shadows dance.

"Jude," Locke says, touching my arm, startling me. His fox eyes crinkle in amusement. "I admit, I am a little jealous to see Cardan parading you around on his arm."

I take a step back. "I don't have time for this."

"I liked you, you know," he says. "I like you still."

For a moment, I wonder what would happen if I hauled off and punched him.

"Go away, Locke," I tell him.

His smile returns. "The thing I like best is how you never do what I imagine you will. For instance, I didn't think you'd duel over me."

"I didn't." I pull away from him and head to the table, a little unsteady on my feet.

“There you are,” Cardan says as I take my place beside him. “How has the night been going for you? Mine has been full of dull conversations about how my head is going to find itself on a spike.”

My hands shake as I take my place. I tell myself that it’s just the poison. My mouth is dry. I find myself without the wit for verbal sparring. Servants set down dishes—roasted goose shining with currant glaze, oysters and stewed ramps, acorn cakes and whole fish stuffed with rose hips. Wine is poured, dark green with pieces of gold floating in it. I watch them sink to the bottom of the glass, shining sediment.

“Have I told you how hideous you look tonight?” Cardan asks, leaning back in the elaborately carved chair, the warmth of his words turning the question into something like a compliment.

“No,” I say, glad to be annoyed back into the present. “Tell me.”

“I cannot,” he says, then frowns. “Jude?” I may never be used to the sound of my name on his lips. His brows draw together. “There’s a bruise coming up on your jaw.”

I take a deep drink of water. “I’m fine,” I tell him.

It’s not long now.

Balekin stands and raises his glass.

I shove back my chair, so that I am on my feet when the explosion happens. For a moment, everything is so loud that it feels like the room is tilting sideways. The Folk scream. Crystal goblets fall and shatter.

The Bomb has struck.

In the confusion, a single black bolt flies from a shadowed alcove and sinks into the wooden table right in front of Cardan.

Balekin leaps to his feet. “There,” he shouts. “The assassin!” Knights run toward the Roach, who leaps out of the gloom and shoots again.

Another bolt flies toward Cardan, who pretends to be too stunned to move, just the way we practiced. The Roach explained to Cardan in great detail how it would be much safer to be still, much easier to miss him that way.

What we didn’t count on is Balekin. He knocks Cardan out of the chair, throws him to the floor, and covers Cardan’s body with his own. As I stare at them, I realize how little I’ve understood their relationship. Because, yes, Balekin hasn’t noticed that the Ghost has climbed onto the ledge with the

Blood Crown. Yes, he sent his knights after the Roach, allowing the Bomb to bar the doors of this room.

But he has also reminded Cardan of why not to go forward with this plan.

I have been thinking of Balekin as the brother Cardan hated, as the brother who'd murdered their whole family. I'd forgotten that Balekin is Cardan's family. Balekin is the person who raised him when Dain plotted against him, when his father sent him from the palace. Balekin is all he has left.

And, although I am sure Balekin would make for a terrible king, one who would hurt Cardan along with many others—I am equally sure that he would give Cardan power. Cardan would be allowed to be cruel, so long as it was clear that Balekin was crueler.

Putting the crown on Balekin's head was a safe bet. Much safer than trusting me, than believing in some future Oak. He's pledged himself to me. I just need to take care he doesn't find some way around my commands.

I am a beat behind, and it's harder to push through the crowd than I thought, so I am not where I told the Ghost I would be. When I look up at the ledge, he's there, moving out of shadow. He throws the crown, but not to me. The Ghost tosses the crown to my identical twin. It falls at Taryn's feet.

Vivi has taken Oak's hand. Lord Roiben is pushing through the crowd.

Taryn picks up the crown.

"Give it to Vivi," I call to her. The Ghost, realizing his mistake, draws his crossbow and points it at my sister, but there's no way to shoot his way out of this. She gives me a terrible, betrayed look.

Cardan struggles to his feet. Balekin is up, too, striding across the room.

"Child, if you do not give that to me, I will cut you in half," Balekin tells Taryn. "I will be the High King, and when I am, I will punish any who inconvenienced me."

She holds it out, looking between Balekin and Vivi and me. Then she looks at all the lords and ladies watching her.

"Give me my crown," Balekin says, walking toward her.

Lord Roiben steps into Balekin's path. He presses his hand to Balekin's chest. "Wait." He hasn't drawn a blade, but I see the shine of knives under his coat.

Balekin tries to push Roiben's hand away, but he does not move. The Ghost has his crossbow trained on Balekin, and every eye in the room is watching him. Queen Orlagh is several steps away.

Violence hangs heavily in the air.

I move toward Taryn to get in front of her.

If Balekin draws a weapon, if he throws away diplomacy and simply charges, the room seems ready to explode into bloodshed. Some will fight on his side, some against. No vows to the crown matter now, and watching him murder his own family hasn't left anyone feeling safe. He has brought the lords and ladies of Faerie here to win them over; even he seems to see that more murder is unlikely to do that.

Besides, the Ghost can shoot him before he gets to Taryn, and he wears no armor under his clothes. No matter how heavy the embroidery, it will not save him from a bolt to the heart.

"She's only a mortal girl," he says.

"This is a lovely banquet, Balekin, son of Eldred," Queen Orlagh says. "But sadly lacking in amusements before now. Let this be our entertainment. After all, the crown is secure in this room, is it not? And you or your younger brother are the only ones who can wear it. Let the girl choose whom she will give it to. What does it matter, if neither of you will crown the other?"

I am surprised. I thought Queen Orlagh was his ally, but then I suppose Nicasia's friendship with Cardan might have made her favor him. Or perhaps she favors neither of them and only wants the sea to have greater power, by diminishing the power of the land.

"This is ridiculous," he says. "What of the explosion? Didn't that entertain you sufficiently?"

"It certainly piqued *my* interest," Lord Roiben says. "You seem to have lost your general somewhere as well. Your rule hasn't even formally begun, but it certainly appears chaotic."

I turn to Taryn and close my fingers over the cool metal of the crown. Up close, it is exquisite. The leaves seem to grow out of the dark gold, to be living things, their stems crossing over one another in a delicate knotwork.

"Please," I say. There is still so much that's bad between us. So much anger and betrayal and jealousy.

“What are you doing?” Taryn hisses at me. Behind her, Locke is looking at me with an odd gleam in his eyes. My story just got more interesting, and I know how much he loves story above all else.

“The best I can,” I say.

I tug, and for a long moment, Taryn holds fast. Then she opens her hand, and I stagger back with the crown.

Vivi has brought Oak as close as she dares. Oriana stands with the crowd, clasping and unclasping her hands. She must notice Madoc’s absence, must be wondering what I meant when I spoke of a price.

“Prince Cardan,” I say. “This is for you.”

The crowd parts to let him through, the other key player in this drama. He walks to stand to one side of me and Oak.

“Stop!” Balekin shouts. “Stop them immediately.” He draws a blade, clearly no longer interested in playing politics. Around the room, more swords are unsheathed in a terrible echo of his. I can hear the hum of enchanted steel in the air.

I reach for Nightfell at the moment the Ghost lets his bolt fly.

Balekin staggers back. I hear the sound of indrawn breaths all around the room. Shooting the king, even if he’s not wearing a crown, is no small thing. Then, as Balekin’s sword falls to the ancient rug, I see where he was shot.

His hand is pinioned to the dining table by a crossbow bolt. One that appears to be iron.

“Cardan,” Balekin calls. “I know you. I know that you’d prefer I did the difficult work of ruling while you enjoyed the power. I know that you despise mortals and ruffians and fools. Come, I have not always danced to your piping, but you haven’t the stomach to truly cross me. Bring me the crown.”

I gather Oak close to me and put the crown into his hands, so that he can see it. So that he can get used to holding it. Vivi pats him encouragingly on his back.

“Bring me the crown, Cardan,” Balekin says.

Prince Cardan turns on his elder brother the same cool and calculated gaze with which he has regarded so many other creatures before he’s torn the wings from their back, before he’s cast them into rivers or sent them

from the Court entirely. “No, brother. I do not think that I will. I think that if I did not have another reason to cross you, I would do it for spite.”

Oak looks up at me, searching for confirmation that he’s doing okay in the face of all this shouting. I nod with an encouraging smile.

“Show Oak,” I whisper to Cardan. “Show him what he’s supposed to do. Kneel down.”

“They’re going to think—” he starts, but I interrupt him.

“Just do it.”

Cardan kneels, and a hush goes through the crowd. Swords are returned to sheaths. Movements slow.

“Oh, this *is* amusing,” says Lord Roiben in a low voice. “Who might that child be? Or whose?” He and Queen Annet share a very Unseelie smile.

“See?” Cardan says to Oak, and then makes an impatient gesture. “Now the crown.”

I look around at the lords and ladies of Faerie. Not one of their faces is friendly. All of them appear wary, waiting. Balekin’s expression is wild with fury, and he pulls against the bolt, as though he might rip his hand in half before he allowed this to happen. Oak takes a hesitant step toward Cardan, then another.

“Phase four,” Cardan whispers to me, still believing we’re on the same side.

I think of Madoc, dozing away upstairs, all his dreams of murder. I think of Oriana and Oak being forced apart for years. I think of Cardan and how he will hate me. I think of what it means to make myself the villain of the piece. “For the next full minute, I command you not to move,” I whisper back.

Cardan goes utterly still.

“Go ahead,” Vivi says to Oak. “Just like we practiced.”

And with that, Oak puts the crown down on Cardan’s head, to rest on his brow. “I crown you.” Oak’s little-kid voice is uncertain. “King. High King of Faerie.” His eyes go to Vivi, to Oriana. He’s waiting for one of them to tell him he did well, that he is done.

People gasp. Balekin gives a howl of fury. There is laughter and outrage and delight. Everyone likes a surprise, and the Folk like one more than almost anything else.

Cardan looks at me with helpless rage. Then, the full minute of my command up, he rises slowly to his feet. The fury in his eyes is familiar, the glitter of them like banked fire, like coals burning hotter than flames ever could. This time I deserve it. I promised he was going to be able to walk away from the Court and all its manipulations. I promised he would be free from all this. I lied.

It's not that I don't want Oak to be the High King. I do. He will be. But there's only one way to make sure the throne remains ready for him while he learns everything he needs to know—and that's if someone else occupies it. Seven years and Cardan can step down, abdicate in Oak's favor and do whatever he wants. But until then, he's going to have to keep my brother's throne warm.

Lord Roiben sinks to one knee, as he promised. "My king," he says. I wonder what that promise will cost. I wonder what he will ask us for, now that he has helped give Cardan a crown.

And then the cry goes up around the room, from Queen Annet to Queen Orlagh and Lord Severin. From the other side, Taryn stares at me, clearly shocked. To her, I must seem mad, to put someone I despise on the throne, but there is no way for me to explain myself. I sink to my knees along with everyone else, and so does she.

All my promises have come due.

For a long moment, Cardan just looks around the room, but he has little choice, and he must know it. "Rise," he says, and we do.

I step back, fading into the throng.

Cardan has been a prince of Faerie all his life. No matter what he wants, he knows what's expected of him. He knows how to charm a crowd, how to entertain. He orders the broken glass cleared away. He has new goblets brought out, new wine poured. The toast he gives—to surprises and to the benefits of being too drunk to show up for the first coronation—causes all the lords and ladies to laugh. And if I notice that his hand grips his wineglass tightly enough to turn his knuckles white, then I imagine I am the only one who does.

Yet I am surprised when he turns to me, eyes blazing. It feels as though the room is empty but for us. He lifts his glass anew, mouth curving in a mockery of a smile. "And to Jude, who gave me a gift tonight. One that I plan to repay in kind."

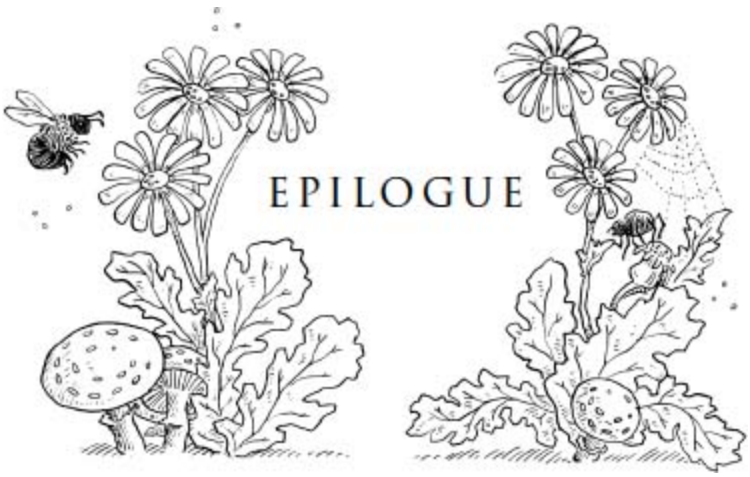
I try not to visibly flinch as glasses lift around me. Crystal rings. More wine flows. More laughter sounds.

The Bomb elbows me in the side. “We came up with your code name,” she mouths. I hadn’t even seen her come in past the locked doors.

“What?” I feel as tired as I have ever felt, and yet, for seven years, I will not be able to truly rest.

I expect her to say *The Liar.* She gives me a tricksy grin, full of secrets. “What else? The Queen.”

It turns out I still don’t know how to laugh.



I stand in the middle of Target, pushing the cart while Oak and Vivi pick out bedsheets and lunch boxes, skinny jeans and sandals. Oak looks around in mild confusion and pleasure. He keeps picking up things, puzzling over them, and then setting them down again. In the candy aisle, he adds bars of chocolate to the cart, along with jelly beans, lollipops, and chunks of candied ginger. Vivi doesn't stop him, so I don't, either.

It's odd to see Oak with his horns glamoured away, his ears looking as round as mine. It's odd to see him in the toy aisle, trying out a scooter with an owl-shaped backpack over one arm.

I expected that it would be hard to persuade Oriana to let him go with Vivi, but after Cardan's coronation, she agreed that Oak being away from the Court for a few years was for the best. Balekin is imprisoned in a tower. Madoc woke in a rage, only to find that his moment for seizing the crown was past.

"So he's really your brother, right?" Heather asks Vivi as Oak kicks off on the scooter, flying through the greeting card aisle. "You could tell me if he was your son."

Vivi laughs delightedly. "I've got secrets, but that's not one of them."

Heather wasn't thrilled about Vivienne showing up with a child and a half-baked explanation about why he had to live with her, but she didn't

kick them out. Heather's sofa pulled out into a bed, and they agreed he could sleep there until Vivi found a job and they were able to afford a larger apartment.

I know Vivi isn't going to get conventional work, but she will be fine. She will be better than fine. In another world, given our parents and our past, I would have kept on encouraging Vivi to trust Heather with the truth. But for now, if she feels like she has to keep the deception going, I am hardly in a position to contradict her.

As we stand in the checkout line and Vivi pays for her haul with leaves glamoured to seem like bills, I think again of the aftermath of the banquet-turned-coronation. Of the blur of the Folk eating and joking. Of everyone marveling over Oak, who appeared both pleased and panicked. Of Oriana, clearly not sure whether to congratulate me or to slap me. Of Taryn, quiet, considering, holding tightly to Locke's hand. Of Nicasia giving Cardan a lingering kiss on his royal cheek.

I have done the thing, and now I must live with what I have done.

I have lied and I have betrayed and I have triumphed. If only there was someone to congratulate me.

Heather sighs and smiles dreamily at Vivi as we load our purchases into the trunk of Heather's Prius. Back at the apartment, Heather takes some premade pizza dough out of her fridge and explains how to make personal pies.

"Mom will visit me, won't she?" Oak asks as he places pieces of chocolate and marshmallows on top of his dough.

I squeeze his arm as Heather sticks the food in the oven. "Of course she will. Think of being here with Vivi as an apprenticeship. You learn what you need to know, and then you come home."

"How will I know when I've learned it, since I don't know it now?" he asks.

The question sounds like a riddle. "Come back when returning feels like a hard choice instead of an easy one," I answer finally. Vivi looks over, as though she's overheard. Her expression is thoughtful.

I eat a slice of Oak's pizza and lick the chocolate off my fingers. It's sweet enough to make me wince, but I don't mind. I just want to sit with them a few more moments before I have to fly back to Faerie alone.

When I dismount from my ragwort steed, I head to the palace. I have rooms there now—a vast sitting area, a bedroom behind latching double doors, and a dressing area with empty closets. All I have to hang in them is what I took out of Madoc's estates and a few things I got at Target.

Here is where I will live, to keep Cardan close, to use my power over him to ensure things go smoothly. The Court of Shadows will grow beneath the castle, fed on being both the High King's spies and his keepers.

They'll have their gold, straight from the king's hand.

What I have not done, not really, is spoken with Cardan. I left him with only a few commands, the familiar hatred in his face enough to make a coward out of me. But I am going to have to talk to him eventually. There is no profit in my putting it off any longer.

Still, it is with a heavy heart and leaden steps that I make my way to the royal rooms. I knock, only to be told by a prim-seeming manservant with flowers braided in his blond beard that the High King has gone to the great hall.

I find him there, lounging on the throne of Faerie, looking out from the dais. The room is empty except for us. My footfalls echo as I move across the floor.

Cardan is dressed in breeches, a waistcoat, and another coat over that, fitted in his shoulders, tapered in sharply at the waist and falling to his midthigh. The cloth is uncut velvet in a deep burgundy, with ivory velvet at the lapels, shoulders, and waistcoat. Stitching in golden thread covers the whole, matched by golden buttons and golden buckles on his tall boots. At his throat is a ruff of pale owl feathers.

His black hair falls in opulent curls around his cheeks. The shadows bring out the sharpness of his bones, the length of his lashes, the merciless beauty of his face.

I am horrified by how much he looks like the King of Faerie.

I am horrified by my own impulse to bend my knee to him, my own desire to let him touch my head with a ringed hand.

What have I done? For so long, there was no one I trusted less. And now I must contend with him, must match my will to his. His oath does not seem

enough of an antidote against his cleverness.

What in the world have I done?

I keep walking, though. I keep my expression as cold as I know how. He's the one who smiles, but his smile is colder than any stiff face could be. "A year and a day," he calls out. "Blink and that will be over. And what will you do then?"

I draw closer to him. "I hope I can persuade you to remain king until Oak is ready to return."

"Maybe I will acquire a taste for ruling," he says coolly. "Maybe I won't ever want to give it up."

"I don't think so," I say, although I've always known that was one possibility. I've always known that removing him from the throne might be harder than putting him there.

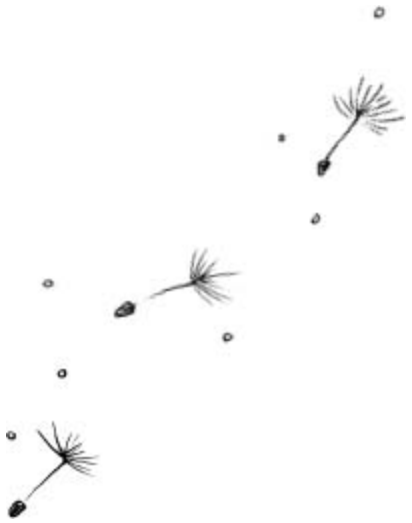
I have a bargain with him for a year and a day. I have a year and a day to come to a bargain for longer than that. *And not for one minute more.*

His grin widens, shows teeth. "I don't think I will be a good king. I never wanted to be one, certainly not a good one. You made me your puppet. Very well, Jude, daughter of Madoc, I will *be* your puppet. You rule. You contend with Balekin, with Roiben, with Orlagh of the Undersea. You be my seneschal, do the work, and I will drink wine and make my subjects laugh. I may be the useless shield you put in front of your brother, but don't expect me to start being useful."

I expected something else, a direct threat, perhaps. Somehow, this is worse.

He rises from the throne. "Come, have a seat." His voice is replete with danger, lush with menace. The flowering branches have sprouted thorns so thickly that petals are barely visible.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?" he asks. "What you sacrificed everything for. Go on. It's all yours."



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my writer friends who saw me through the scheming and imagining and writing and editing of this book. Thank you, Sarah Rees Brennan, Leigh Bardugo, Kelly Link, Cassandra Clare, Maureen Johnson, Robin Wasserman, Steve Berman, Gwenda Bond, Christopher Rowe, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Paolo Bacigalupi, Ellen Kushner, Delia Sherman, Gavin Grant, Joshua Lewis, Carrie Ryan, and Kathleen Jennings (who drew beautiful pictures during a workshop, thereby producing my favorite critique ever).

Thanks, too, to everyone at ICFA who gave me feedback after I read the first three chapters out loud.

Thank you to everyone at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, who have supported my weird vision. Thanks especially to my amazing editor, Alvina Ling, Kheryn Callender, Lisa Moraleda, and Victoria Stapleton.

And thank you to Barry Goldblatt and Joanna Volpe for shepherding the book through its various trials and tribulations.

Thanks most of all to my husband, Theo, for talking through so much of this book with me over many years, and to our son, Sebastian, for distracting me from the writing and giving me a fuller heart.

Thank you for choosing a Hot Key book.

If you want to know more about our authors and what we publish, you can find us online.

You can start at our website

www.hotkeybooks.com

And you can also find us on:

We hope to see you soon!

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.hotkeybooks.com

Text copyright © Holly Black, 2018
Illustrations copyright © Kathleen Jennings, 2018

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

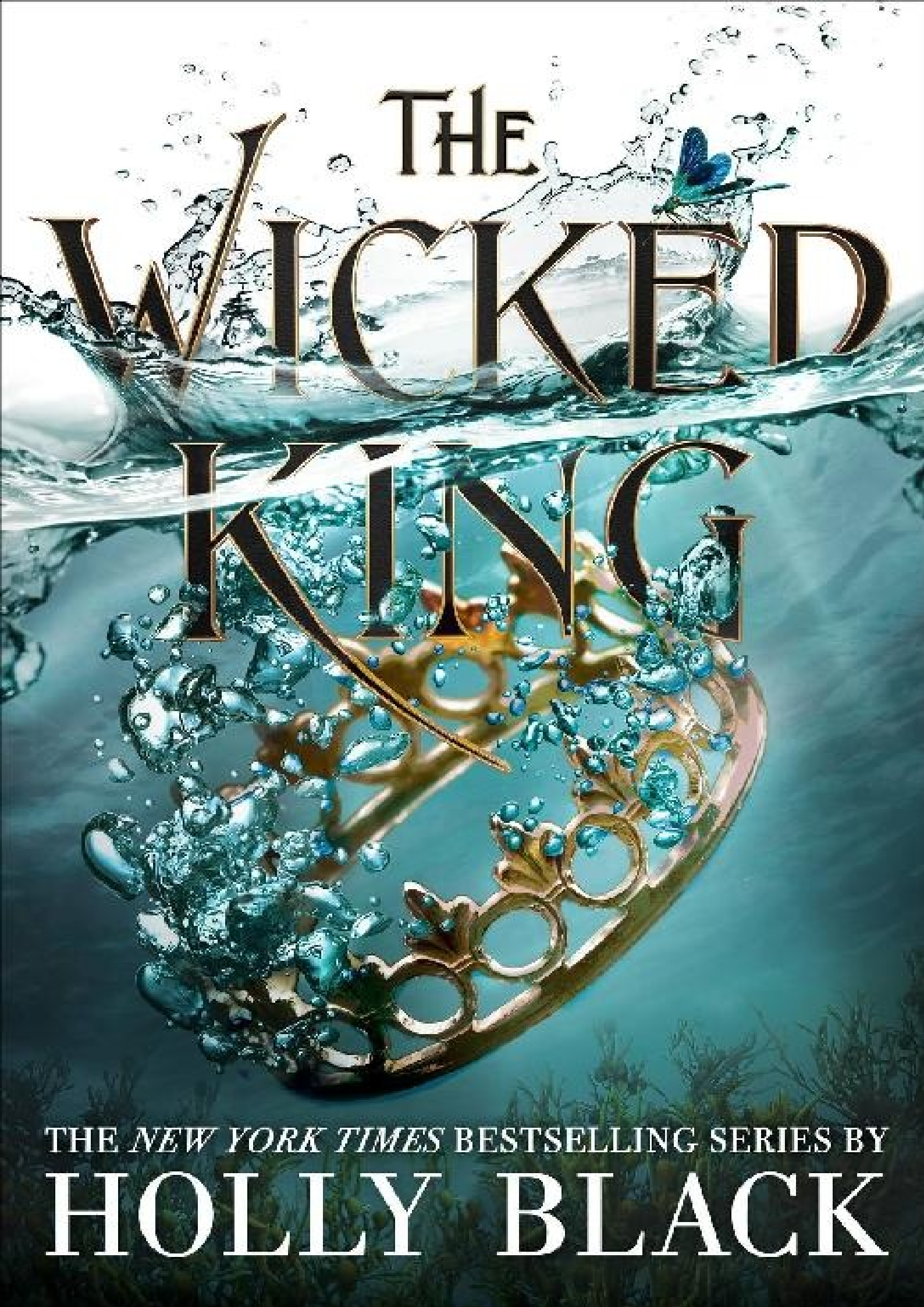
The right of Holly Black and Kathleen Jennings to be identified as author and illustrator of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0646-1

Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre Ltd,
a Bonnier Publishing company
www.bonnierpublishing.com


THE
WICKED
KING
THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES BY
HOLLY BLACK

THE WICKED KING

HOLLY BLACK

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK BOSTON

Copyright

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2019 by Holly Black
Illustrations by Kathleen Jennings

Cover art copyright © 2019 by Sean Freeman. Cover design by Karina Granda.
Cover copyright © 2019 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
Visit us at LBYR.com

First Edition: January 2019

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.
The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

“Nymphidia” by Michael Drayton, first published in 1627
“The Fairies” by William Allingham, first published in 1850

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Black, Holly, author. | Jennings, Kathleen, illustrator.
Title: The wicked king / Holly Black ; illustrations by Kathleen Jennings.
First edition. | New York ; Boston : Little, Brown and Company, 2019. |
Series: [The Folk of the Air ; 2] | Summary: As seneschal to High King Cardan, Jude must fight to keep control of the Faerie throne while her younger brother, Oak, enjoys the childhood she never knew.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017056642| ISBN 9780316310352 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780316310338 (ebook) | ISBN 9780316310345 (library edition ebook)
Subjects: | CYAC: Kings, queens, rulers, etc.—Fiction. | Power (Philosophy)—Fiction. | Courts and courtiers—Fiction. | Fairies—Fiction. | Sisters—Fiction. | Fantasy.
Classification: LCC PZ7.B52878 Wic 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017056642

ISBNs: 978-0-316-31035-2 (hardcover), 978-0-316-31033-8 (ebook), 978-0-316-45213-7 (int’l), 978-0-316-48713-9 (Barnes & Noble)

E3-20181107-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Map

Book One

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17

Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21

Book Two

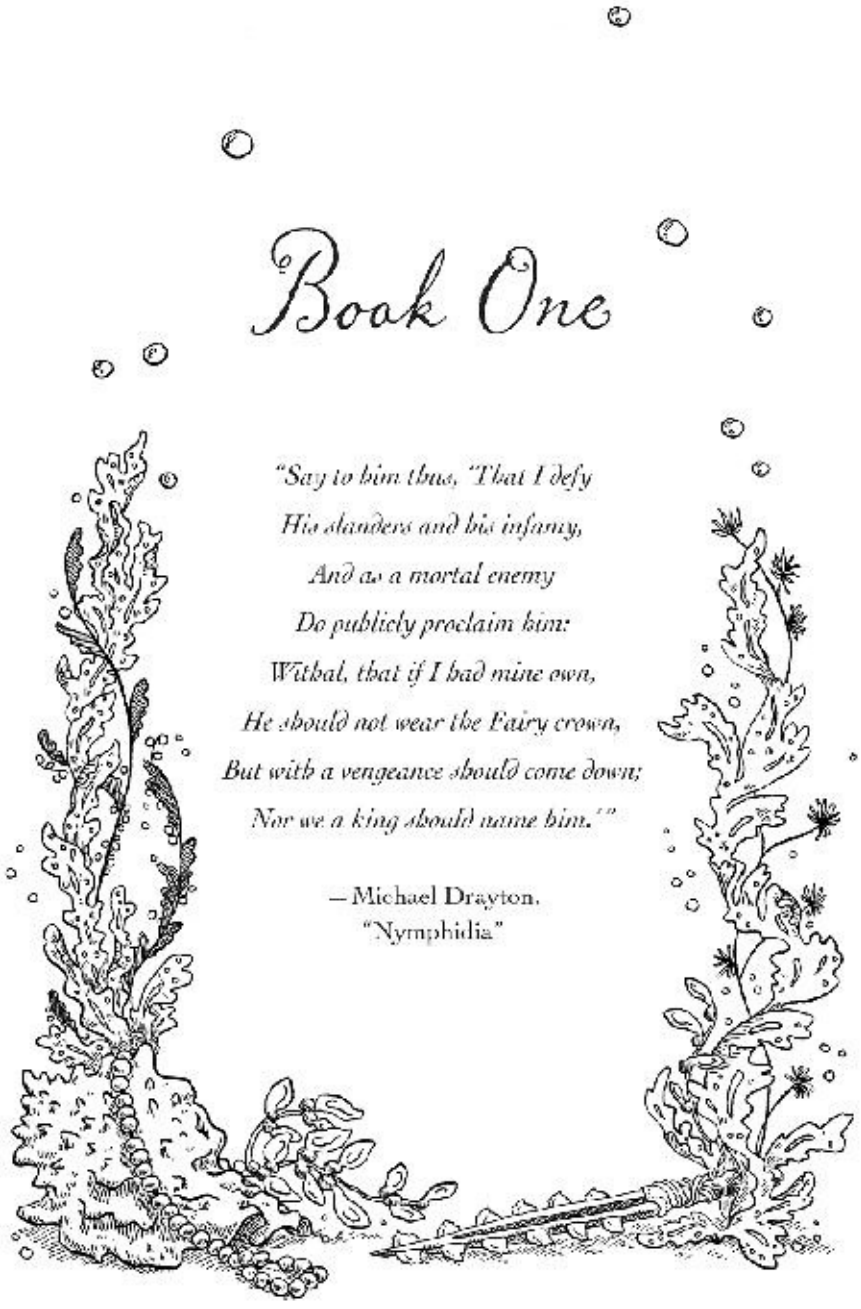
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Epilogue

Acknowledgments

For Kelly Link, one of the merfolk

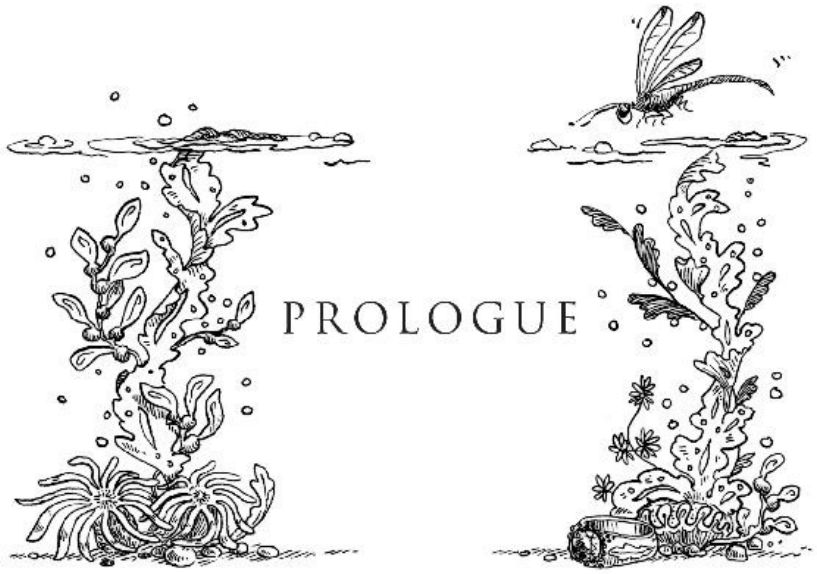
Map of the Shifting Isles of
ELFHAME
Crooked Forest
Locke's Estate
Palace of Elfhame
Tower of Forgetting
INSMOOR
Milkwood
INSHIRE
INSWEAL
Lake of Masks
Hollow Hall

Book One



"Say to him thus, 'That I defy
His slanders and his infamy,
And as a mortal enemy
Do publicly proclaim him:
Withal, that if I had mine own,
He should not wear the Fairy crown,
But with a vengeance should come down;
Nor we a king should name him.'"

—Michael Drayton,
"Nymphidia"



PROLOGUE

Jude lifted the heavy practice sword, moving into the first stance—readiness.

Get used to the weight, Madoc had told her. *You must be strong enough to strike and strike and strike again without tiring. The first lesson is to make yourself that strong.*

It will hurt. Pain makes you strong.

That was the first lesson he'd taught her after he'd cut down her parents with a sword not unlike the one she held now. Then she'd been seven, a baby. Now she was nine and lived in Faerieland, and everything was changed.

She planted her feet in the grass. Wind ruffled her hair as she moved through the stances. One; the sword before her, canted to one side, protecting her body. Two; the pommel high, as though the blade were a horn coming from her head. Three: down to her hip, then in a deceptively casual droop in front of her. Then four: up again, to her shoulder. Each position could move easily into a strike or a defense. Fighting was chess, anticipating the move of one's opponent and countering it before one got hit.

But it was chess played with the whole body. Chess that left her bruised and tired and frustrated with the whole world and with herself, too.

Or maybe it was more like riding a bike. When she'd been learning to do that, back in the real world, she'd fallen lots of times. Her knees had been scabby enough that Mom thought she might have scars. But Jude had taken off her training wheels herself and disdained riding carefully on the sidewalk, as Taryn did. Jude wanted to ride in the street, fast, like Vivi, and if she got gravel embedded into her skin for it, well, then she'd let Dad pick it out with

tweezers at night.

Sometimes Jude longed for her bike, but there were none in Faerie. Instead, she had giant toads and thin greenish ponies and wild-eyed horses slim as shadows.

And she had weapons.

And her parents' murderer, now her foster father. The High King's general, Madoc, who wanted to teach her how to ride too fast and how to fight to the death. No matter how hard she swung at him, it just made him laugh. He liked her anger. *Fire*, he called it.

She liked it when she was angry, too. Angry was better than scared. Better than remembering she was a mortal among monsters. No one was offering her the option of training wheels anymore.

On the other side of the field, Madoc was guiding Taryn through a series of stances. Taryn was learning the sword, too, although she had different problems than Jude. Her stances were more perfect, but she hated sparring. She paired the obvious defenses with the obvious attacks, so it was easy to lure her into a series of moves and then score a hit by breaking the pattern. Each time it happened, Taryn got mad, as though Jude were flubbing the steps of a dance rather than winning.

"Come here," Madoc called to Jude across the silvery expanse of grass.

She walked to him, sword slung over her shoulders. The sun was just setting, but faeries are twilight creatures, and their day was not even half done. The sky was streaked with copper and gold. She inhaled a deep breath of pine needles. For a moment, she felt as though she were just a kid learning a new sport.

"Come spar," he said when Jude got closer. "Both of you girls against this old redcap." Taryn leaned against her sword, the tip of it sinking into the ground. She wasn't supposed to hold it that way—it wasn't good for the blade—but Madoc didn't reprimand her.

"Power," he said. "Power is the ability to get what you want. Power is the ability to be the one making the decisions. And how do we get power?"

Jude stepped beside her twin. It was obvious that Madoc expected a response, but also that he expected the wrong one. "We learn how to fight well?" she said to say *something*.

When Madoc smiled at her, she could see the points of his bottom cuspids, longer than the rest of his teeth. He tousled her hair, and she felt the sharp edges of his claw-like nails against her scalp, too light to hurt, but a reminder of what he was nonetheless. "We get power by taking it."

He pointed toward a low hill with a thorn tree growing on it. "Let's make a game of the next lesson. That's my hill. Go ahead and take it."

Taryn dutifully trooped toward it, Jude behind her. Madoc kept pace, his smile all teeth.

“Now what?” Taryn asked, without any particular excitement.

Madoc looked into the distance, as though he was contemplating and discarding various rules. “Now hold it against attack.”

“Wait, what?” Jude asked. “From you?”

“Is this a strategy game or a sparring practice?” Taryn asked, frowning.

Madoc brought one finger under her chin, raising her head until she was looking into his golden cat eyes. “What is sparring but a game of strategy, played at speed?” he told her, with a great seriousness. “Talk with your sister. When the sun reaches the trunk of that tree, I will come for my hill. Knock me down but once and you both win.”

Then he departed for a copse of trees some ways away. Taryn sat down on the grass.

“I don’t want to do this,” she said.

“It’s just a game,” Jude reminded her nervously.

Taryn gave her a long look—the one that they gave each other when one of them was pretending things were normal. “Okay, so what do *you* think we should do?”

Jude looked up into the branches of the thorn tree. “What if one of us threw rocks while the other did the sparring?”

“Okay,” Taryn said, pushing herself up and beginning to gather stones into the folds of her skirts. “You don’t think he’ll get mad, do you?”

Jude shook her head, but she understood Taryn’s question. What if he killed them by accident?

You’ve got to choose which hill to die on, Mom used to tell Dad. It had been one of those weird sayings adults expected her to understand, even though they made no sense—like, “one in the hand is worth two in the bush” or “every stick has two ends” or the totally mysterious “a cat may look at a king.” Now, standing on an actual hill with a sword in her hand, she understood it a lot better.

“Get into position,” Jude said, and Taryn wasted no time in climbing the thorn tree. Jude checked the sunmark, wondering what sort of tricks Madoc might use. The longer he waited, the darker it would get, and while he could see in the dark, Jude and Taryn could not.

But, in the end, he didn’t use any tricks. He came out of the woods and in their direction, howling as though he were leading an army of a hundred. Jude’s knees went weak with terror.

This is just a game, she reminded herself frantically. The closer he got, though, the less her body believed her. Every animal instinct strained to run.

Their strategy seemed silly now in the face of his hugeness and their smallness, in the face of her fear. She thought of her mother bleeding on the ground, recalled the smell of her insides as they leaked out. The memory felt like thunder in her head. She was going to die.

Run, her whole body urged. *RUN!*

No, her mother had run. Jude planted her feet.

She made herself move into the first position, even though her legs felt wobbly. He had the advantage, even coming up that hill, because he had momentum on his side. The stones raining down on him from Taryn barely checked his pace.

Jude spun out of the way, not even bothering to try to block the first blow. Putting the tree between them, she dodged his second and third. When the fourth one came, it knocked her to the grass.

She closed her eyes against the killing strike.

“You can take a thing when no one’s looking. But defending it, even with all the advantage on your side, is no easy task,” Madoc told her with a laugh. She looked up to find him offering her a hand. “Power is much easier to acquire than it is to hold on to.”

Relief broke over her. It was just a game, after all. Just another lesson.

“That wasn’t fair,” Taryn complained.

Jude didn’t say anything. Nothing was fair in Faerie. She had learned to stop expecting it to be.

Madoc hauled Jude to her feet and threw a heavy arm over her shoulders. He drew her and her twin in for an embrace. He smelled like smoke and dried blood, and Jude let herself sag against him. It was good to be hugged. Even by a monster.

CHAPTER 1

The new High King of Faerie lounges on his throne, his crown resting at an insouciant angle, his long villainously scarlet cloak pinned at his shoulders and sweeping the floor. An earring shines from the peak of one pointed ear. Heavy rings glitter along his knuckles. His most ostentatious decoration, however, is his soft, sullen mouth.

It makes him look every bit the jerk that he is.

I stand to one side of him, in the honored position of seneschal. I am supposed to be High King Cardan's most trusted advisor, and so I play that part, rather than my real role—the hand behind the throne, with the power to compel him to obey should he try to cross me.

Scanning the crowd, I look for a spy from the Court of Shadows. They intercepted a communication from the Tower of Forgetting, where Cardan's brother is jailed, and are bringing it to me instead of to its intended recipient.

And that's only the latest crisis.

It's been five months since I forced Cardan onto the throne of Elfhame as my puppet king, five months since I betrayed my family, since my sister carried my little brother to the mortal realm and away from the crown that he might have worn, since I crossed swords with Madoc.

Five months since I've slept for more than a few hours at a stretch.

It seemed like a good trade—a very *faerie* trade, even: put someone who despised me on the throne so that Oak would be out of danger. It was thrilling to trick Cardan into promising to serve me for a year and a day, exhilarating when my plan came together. Then, a year and a day seemed like forever. But

now I must figure out how to keep him in my power—and out of trouble—for longer than that. Long enough to give Oak a chance to have what I didn't: a childhood.

Now a year and a day seems like no time at all.

And despite having put Cardan on the throne through my own machinations, despite scheming to keep him there, I cannot help being unnerved by how comfortable he looks.

Faerie rulers are tied to the land. They are the lifeblood and the beating heart of their realm in some mystical way that I don't fully understand. But surely Cardan isn't that, not with his commitment to being a layabout who does none of the real work of governance.

Mostly, his obligations appear to be allowing his ring-covered hands to be kissed and accepting the blandishments of the Folk. I'm sure he enjoys that part of it—the kisses, the bowing and scraping. He's certainly enjoying the wine. He calls again and again for his cabochon-encrusted goblet to be refilled with a pale green liquor. The very smell of it makes my head spin.

During a lull, he glances up at me, raising one black brow. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Not as much as you are," I tell him.

No matter how much he disliked me when we were in school, that was a guttering candle to the steady flame of his hatred now. His mouth curls into a smile. His eyes shine with wicked intent. "Look at them all, your subjects. A shame not a one knows who their true ruler is."

My face heats a little at his words. His gift is to take a compliment and turn it into an insult, a jab that hurts more for the temptation to take it at face value.

I spent so many revels avoiding notice. Now everyone sees me, bathed in candlelight, in one of the three nearly identical black doublets I wear each evening, my sword Nightfell at my hip. They twirl in their circle dances and play their songs, they drink their golden wine and compose their riddles and their curses while I look down on them from the royal dais. They are beautiful and terrible, and they might despise my mortality, might mock it, but I am up here and they are not.

Of course, perhaps that isn't so different from hiding. Perhaps it is just hiding in plain sight. But I cannot deny that the power I hold gives me a kick, a jolt of pleasure whenever I think on it. I just wish Cardan couldn't tell.

If I look carefully, I can spot my twin sister, Taryn, dancing with Locke, her betrothed. Locke, who I once thought might love me. Locke, whom I once thought I could love. It's Taryn I miss, though. Nights like tonight, I imagine hopping down from the dais and going to her, trying to explain my choices.

Her marriage is only three weeks away, and still we haven't spoken.

I keep telling myself I need her to come to me first. She played me for a fool with Locke. I still feel stupid when I look at them. If she won't apologize, then at least she should be the one to pretend there's nothing to apologize for. I might accept that, even. But I will not be the one to go to Taryn, to beg.

My eyes follow her as she dances.

I don't bother to look for Madoc. His love is part of the price I paid for this position.

A short, wizened faerie with a cloud of silver hair and a coat of scarlet kneels below the dais, waiting to be recognized. His cuffs are jeweled, and the moth pin that holds his cloak in place has wings that move on their own. Despite his posture of subservience, his gaze is greedy.

Beside him stand two pale hill Folk with long limbs and hair that blows behind them, though there is no breeze.

Drunk or sober, now that Cardan is the High King, he must listen to those subjects who would have him rule on a problem, no matter how small, or grant a boon. I cannot imagine why anyone would put their fate in his hands, but Faerie is full of caprice.

Luckily, I'm there to whisper my counsel in his ear, as any seneschal might. The difference is that he must listen to me. And if he whispers back a few horrific insults, well, at least he's forced to whisper.

Of course, then the question becomes whether I deserve to have all this power. *I won't be horrible for the sake of my own amusement* , I tell myself. *That's got to be worth something.*

"Ah," Cardan says, leaning forward on the throne, causing his crown to tip lower on his brow. He takes a deep swallow of the wine and smiles down at the trio. "This must be a grave concern, to bring it before the High King."

"You may already have heard tales of me," says the small faerie. "I made the crown that sits upon your head. I am called Grimsen the Smith, long in exile with the Alderking. His bones are now at rest, and there is a new Alderking in Fairfold, as there is a new High King here."

"Severin," I say.

The smith looks at me, obviously surprised that I have spoken. Then his gaze returns to the High King. "I beg you to allow me to return to the High Court."

Cardan blinks a few times, as though trying to focus on the petitioner in front of him. "So you were yourself exiled? Or you chose to leave?"

I recall Cardan's telling me a little about Severin, but he hadn't mentioned Grimsen. I've heard of him, of course. He's the blacksmith who made the

Blood Crown for Mab and wove enchantments into it. It's said he can make anything from metal, even living things—metal birds that fly, metal snakes that slither and strike. He made the twin swords, Heartseeker and Heartsworn, one that never misses and the other that can cut through anything. Unfortunately, he made them for the Alderking.

"I was sworn to him, as his servant," says Grimsen. "When he went into exile, I was forced to follow—and in so doing, fell into disfavor myself. Although I made only trinkets for him in Fairfold, I was still considered to be his creature by your father.

"Now, with both of them dead, I crave permission to carve out a place for myself here at your Court. Punish me no further, and my loyalty to you will be as great as your wisdom."

I look at the little smith more closely, suddenly sure he's playing with words. But to what end? The request seems genuine, and if Grimsen's humility is not, well, his fame makes that no surprise.

"Very well," Cardan says, looking pleased to be asked for something easy to give. "Your exile is over. Give me your oath, and the High Court will welcome you."

Grimsen bows low, his expression theatrically troubled. "Noble king, you ask for the smallest and most reasonable thing from your servant, but I, who have suffered for such vows, am loath to make them again. Allow me this—grant that I may show you my loyalty in my deeds, rather than binding myself with my words."

I put my hand on Cardan's arm, but he shrugs off my cautioning squeeze. I could say something, and he would be forced—by prior command—to at least not contradict me, but I don't know what to say. Having the smith here, forging for Elfhame, is no small thing. It is worth, perhaps, the lack of an oath.

And yet, something in Grimsen's gaze looks a little too self-satisfied, a little too sure of himself. I suspect a trick.

Cardan speaks before I can puzzle anything more out. "I accept your condition. Indeed, I will give you a boon. An old building with a forge sits on the edge of the palace grounds. You shall have it for your own and as much metal as you require. I look forward to seeing what you will make for us."

Grimsen bows low. "Your kindness shall not be forgotten."

I mislike this, but perhaps I'm being overcautious. Perhaps it's only that I don't like the smith himself. There's little time to consider it before another petitioner steps forward.

A hag—old and powerful enough that the air around her seems to crackle with the force of her magic. Her fingers are twiggy, her hair the color of

smoke, and her nose like the blade of a scythe. Around her throat, she wears a necklace of rocks, each bead carved with whorls that seem to catch and puzzle the eye. When she moves, the heavy robes around her ripple, and I spy clawed feet, like those of a bird of prey.

"Kingling," the hag says. "Mother Marrow brings you gifts."

"Your fealty is all I require." Cardan's voice is light. "For now."

"Oh, I'm sworn to the crown, sure enough," she says, reaching into one of her pockets and drawing out a cloth that looks blacker than the night sky, so black that it seems to drink the light around it. The fabric slithers over her hand. "But I have come all this way to present you with a rare prize."

The Folk do not like debt, which is why they will not repay a favor with mere thanks. Give them an oatcake, and they will fill one of the rooms of your house with grain, overpaying to push debt back onto you. And yet, tribute is given to High Kings all the time—gold, service, swords with names. But we don't usually call those things *gifts* . Nor *prizes* .

I do not know what to make of her little speech.

Her voice is a purr. "My daughter and I wove this of spider silk and nightmares. A garment cut from it can turn a sharp blade, yet be as soft as a shadow against your skin."

Cardan frowns, but his gaze is drawn again and again to the marvelous cloth. "I admit I don't think I've seen its equal."

"Then you accept what I would bestow upon you?" she asks, a sly gleam in her eye. "I am older than your father and your mother. Older than the stones of this palace. As old as the bones of the earth. Though you are the High King, Mother Marrow will have your word."

Cardan's eyes narrow. She's annoyed him, I can see that.

There's a trick here, and this time I know what it is. Before he can, I start speaking. "You said *gifts* , but you have only shown us your marvelous cloth. I am sure the crown would be pleased to have it, were it freely given."

Her gaze comes to rest on me, her eyes hard and cold as night itself. "And who are you to speak for the High King?"

"I am his seneschal, Mother Marrow."

"And will you let this mortal girl answer for you?" she asks Cardan.

He gives me a look of such condescension that it makes my cheeks heat. The look lingers. His mouth twists, curving. "I suppose I shall," he says finally. "It amuses her to keep me out of trouble."

I bite my tongue as he turns a placid expression on Mother Marrow.

"She's clever enough," the hag says, spitting out the words like a curse. "Very well, the cloth is yours, Your Majesty. I give it freely. I give you only that and nothing more."

Cardan leans forward as though they are sharing a jest. “Oh, tell me the rest. I like tricks and snares. Even ones I was nearly caught in.”

Mother Marrow shifts from one clawed foot to the other, the first sign of nerves she’s displayed. Even for a hag with bones as old as she claimed, a High King’s wrath is dangerous. “Very well. An’ you had accepted all I would bestow upon you, you would have found yourself under a geas, allowing you to marry only a weaver of the cloth in my hands. Myself—or my daughter.”

A cold shudder goes through me at the thought of what might have happened then. Could the High King of Faerie have been compelled into such a marriage? Surely there would have been a way around it. I thought of the last High King, who never wed.

Marriage is unusual among the rulers of Faerie because once a ruler, one remains a ruler until death or abdication. Among commoners and the gentry, faerie marriages are arranged to be gotten out of—unlike the mortal “until death do us part,” they contain conditions like “until you shall both renounce each other” or “unless one strikes the other in anger” or the cleverly worded “for the duration of a life” without specifying whose. But a uniting of kings and/or queens can never be dissolved.

Should Cardan marry, I wouldn’t just have to get him off the throne to get Oak on it. I’d have to remove his bride as well.

Cardan’s eyebrows rise, but he has all the appearance of blissful unconcern. “My lady, you flatter me. I had no idea you were interested.”

Her gaze is unflinching as she passes her gift to one of Cardan’s personal guard. “May you grow into the wisdom of your counselors.”

“The fervent prayer of many,” he says. “Tell me. Has your daughter made the journey with you?”

“She is here,” the hag says. A girl steps from the crowd to bow low before Cardan. She is young, with a mass of unbound hair. Like her mother, her limbs are oddly long and twig-like, but where her mother is unsettlingly bony, she has a kind of grace. Maybe it helps that her feet resemble human ones.

Although, to be fair, they are turned backward.

“I would make a poor husband,” Cardan says, turning his attention to the girl, who appears to shrink down into herself at the force of his regard. “But grant me a dance, and I will show you my other talents.”

I give him a suspicious look.

“Come,” Mother Marrow says to the girl, and grabs her, not particularly gently, by the arm, dragging her into the crowd. Then she looks back at Cardan. “We three will meet again.”

“They’re all going to want to marry you, you know,” Locke drawls. I know his voice even before I look to find that he has taken the position that

Mother Marrow vacated.

He grins up at Cardan, looking delighted with himself and the world. “Better to take consorts,” Locke says. “Lots and lots of consorts.”

“Spoken like a man about to enter wedlock,” Cardan reminds him.

“Oh, leave off. Like Mother Marrow, I have brought you a gift.” Locke takes a step toward the dais. “One with fewer barbs.” He doesn’t look in my direction. It’s as though he doesn’t see me or that I am as uninteresting as a piece of furniture.

I wish it didn’t bother me. I wish I didn’t remember standing at the very top of the highest tower on his estate, his body warm against mine. I wish he hadn’t used me to test my sister’s love for him. I wish she hadn’t let him.

If wishes were horses , my mortal father used to say, *beggars would ride* . Another one of those phrases that makes no sense until it does.

“Oh?” Cardan looks more puzzled than intrigued.

“I wish to give you *me* —as your Master of Revels,” Locke announces. “Grant me the position, and I will make it my duty and pleasure to keep the High King of Elfhame from being bored.”

There are so many jobs in a palace—servants and ministers, ambassadors and generals, advisors and tailors, jesters and makers of riddles, grooms for horses and keepers of spiders, and a dozen other positions I’ve forgotten. I didn’t even know there was a Master of Revels. For all I know, he invented the position.

“I will serve up delights you’ve never imagined.” Locke’s smile is infectious. He will serve up trouble, that’s for sure. Trouble I have no time for.

“Have a care,” I say, drawing Locke’s attention to me for the first time. “I am sure you would not wish to insult the High King’s imagination.”

“Indeed, I’m sure not,” Cardan says in a way that’s difficult to interpret.

Locke’s smile doesn’t waver. Instead, he hops onto the dais, causing the knights on either side to move immediately to stop him. Cardan waves them away.

“If you make him Master of Revels—” I begin, quickly, desperately.

“Are you commanding me?” Cardan interrupts, eyebrow arched.

He knows I can’t say yes, not with the possibility of Locke’s overhearing. “Of course not,” I grind out.

“Good,” Cardan says, turning his gaze from me. “I’m of a mind to grant your request, Locke. Things have been so very dull of late.”

I see Locke’s smirk and bite the inside of my cheek to keep back the words of command. It would have been so satisfying to see his expression, to flaunt my power in front of him.

Satisfying, but stupid.

“Before, Grackles and Larks and Falcons vied for the heart of the Court,” Locke says, referring to the factions that preferred revelry, artistry, or war. Factions that fell in and out of favor with Eldred. “But now the Court’s heart is yours and yours alone. Let’s break it.”

Cardan looks at Locke oddly, as though considering, seemingly for the first time, that being High King might be *fun* . As though he’s imagining what it would be like to rule without straining against my leash.

Then, on the other side of the dais, I finally spot the Bomb, a spy in the Court of Shadows, her white hair a halo around her brown face. She signals to me.

I don’t like Locke and Cardan together—don’t like their idea of entertainments—but I try to put that aside as I leave the dais and make my way to her. After all, there is no way to scheme against Locke when he is drawn to whatever amuses him most in the moment.…

Halfway to where the Bomb’s standing, I hear Locke’s voice ring out over the crowd. “We will celebrate the Hunter’s Moon in the Milkwood, and there the High King will give you a debauch such that bards will sing of, this I promise you.”

Dread coils in my belly.

Locke is pulling a few pixies from the crowd up onto the dais, their iridescent wings shining in the candlelight. A girl laughs uproariously and reaches for Cardan’s goblet, drinking it to the dregs. I expect him to lash out, to humiliate her or shred her wings, but he only smiles and calls for more wine.

Whatever Locke has in store, Cardan seems all too ready to play along. All Faerie coronations are followed by a month of revelry—feasting, boozing, riddling, dueling, and more. The Folk are expected to dance through the soles of their shoes from sundown to sunup. But five months after Cardan’s becoming High King, the great hall remains always full, the drinking horns overflowing with mead and clover wine. The revelry has barely slowed.

It has been a long time since Elfhame had such a young High King, and a wild, reckless air infects the courtiers. The Hunter’s Moon is soon, sooner even than Taryn’s wedding. If Locke intends to stoke the flames of revelry higher and higher still, how long before that becomes a danger?

With some difficulty, I turn my back on Cardan. After all, what would be the purpose in catching his eye? His hatred is such that he will do what he can, inside of my commands, to defy me. And he is very good at defiance.

I would like to say that he always hated me, but for a brief, strange time it felt as though we understood each other, maybe even liked each other. Altogether an unlikely alliance, begun with my blade to his throat, it resulted

in his trusting me enough to put himself in my power.

A trust that I betrayed.

Once, he tormented me because he was young and bored and angry and cruel. Now he has better reasons for the torments I am sure he dreams of inflicting on me once a year and a day is gone. It will be very hard to keep him always under my thumb.

I reach the Bomb and she shoves a piece of paper into my hand. “Another note for Cardan from Balekin,” she says. “This one made it all the way to the palace before we intercepted it.”

“Is it the same as the first two?”

She nods. “Much like. Balekin tries to flatter our High King into coming to his prison cell. He wants to propose some kind of bargain.”

“I’m sure he does,” I say, glad once again to have been brought into the Court of Shadows and to have them still watching my back.

“What will you do?” she asks me.

“I’ll go see Prince Balekin. If he wants to make the High King an offer, he’ll have to convince the High King’s seneschal first.”

A corner of her mouth lifts. “I’ll come with you.”

I glance back at the throne again, making a vague gesture. “No. Stay here. Try to keep Cardan from getting into trouble.”

“He *is* trouble,” she reminds me, but doesn’t seem particularly worried by her own worrying pronouncement.

As I head toward the passageways into the palace, I spot Madoc across the room, half in shadow, watching me with his cat eyes. He isn’t close enough to speak, but if he were, I have no doubt what he would say.

Power is much easier to acquire than it is to hold on to.

CHAPTER 2

Balekin is imprisoned in the Tower of Forgetting on the northernmost part of Insweal, Isle of Woe. Insweal is one of the three islands of Elfhame, connected to Insmire and Insmoor by large rocks and patches of land, populated with only a few fir trees, silvery stags, and the occasional treefolk. It's possible to cross between Insmire and Insweal entirely on foot, if you don't mind leaping stone to stone, walking through the Milkwood by yourself, and probably getting at least somewhat wet.

I mind all those things and decide to ride.

As the High King's seneschal, I have the pick of his stables. Never much of a rider, I choose a horse that seems docile enough, her coat a soft black color, her mane in complicated and probably magical knots.

I lead her out while a goblin groom brings me a bit and bridle.

Then I swing onto her back and direct her toward the Tower of Forgetting. Waves crashing against the rocks beneath me. Salt spray misting the air. Insweal is a forbidding island, large stretches of its landscape bare of greenery, just black rocks and tide pools and a tower threaded through with cold iron.

I tie the horse to one of the black metal rings driven into the stone wall of the tower. She whickers nervously, her tail tucked hard against her body. I touch her muzzle in what I hope is a reassuring way.

"I won't be long, and then we can get out of here," I tell her, wishing I'd asked the groom for her name.

I don't feel so differently from the horse as I knock on the heavy wooden

door.

A large, hairy creature opens it. He's wearing beautifully wrought plate armor, blond fur sticking out from any gaps. He's obviously a soldier, which used to mean he would treat me well, for Madoc's sake, but now might mean just the opposite.

"I am Jude Duarte, seneschal to the High King," I tell him. "Here on the crown's business. Let me in."

He steps aside, pulling the door open, and I enter the dim antechamber of the Tower of Forgetting. My mortal eyes adjust slowly and poorly to the lack of light. I do not have the faerie ability to see in near darkness. At least three other guards are there, but I perceive them more as shapes than anything else.

"You're here to see Prince Balekin, one supposes," comes a voice from the back.

It is eerie not to be able to see the speaker clearly, but I pretend the discomfort away and nod. "Take me to him."

"Vulciber," the voice says. "You take her."

The Tower of Forgetting is so named because it exists as a place to put Folk when a monarch wants them struck from the Court's memory. Most criminals are punished with clever curses, quests, or some other form of capricious faerie judgment. To wind up here, one has to have really pissed off someone important.

The guards are mostly soldiers for whom such a bleak and lonely location suits their temperament—or those whose commanders intend them to learn humility from the position. As I look over at the shadowy figures, it's hard to guess which sort they are.

Vulciber comes toward me, and I recognize the hairy soldier who opened the door. He looks to be at least part troll, heavy-browed and long-limbed.

"Lead on," I say.

He gives me a hard look in return. I am not sure what he dislikes about me—my mortality, my position, my intruding on his evening. I don't ask. I just follow him down stone stairs into the wet, mineral-scented darkness. The bloom of soil is heavy in the air, and there is a rotten, mushroomy odor I cannot place.

I stop when the dark grows too deep and I fear I am going to stumble. "Light the lamps," I say.

Vulciber moves in close, his breath on my face, carrying with it the scent of wet leaves. "And if I will not?"

A thin knife comes easily into my hand, slipping down out of a sleeve holster. I press the point against his side, just under the ribs. "Best you don't find out."

“But you can’t see,” he insists, as though I have played some kind of dirty trick on him by not being as intimidated as he’d hoped.

“Maybe I just prefer a little more light,” I say, trying to keep my voice even, though my heart is beating wildly, my palms starting to sweat. If we have to fight on the stairs, I better strike fast and true, because I’ll probably have only that one shot.

Vulciber moves away from me and my knife. I hear his heavy footfalls on the steps and start counting in case I have to follow blind. But then a torch flares to life, emitting green fire.

“Well?” he demands. “Are you coming?”

The stairs pass several cells, some empty and some whose occupants sit far enough from the bars that the torchlight does not illuminate them. None do I recognize until the last.

Prince Balekin’s black hair is held by a circlet, a reminder of his royalty. Despite being imprisoned, he barely looks discomfited. Three rugs cover the damp stone of the floor. He sits in a carved armchair, watching me with hooded, owl-bright eyes. A golden samovar rests on a small, elegant table. Balekin turns a handle, and steaming, fragrant tea spills into fragile porcelain. The scent of it makes me think of seaweed.

But no matter how elegant he appears, he is still in the Tower of Forgetting, a few ruddy moths alighting on the wall above him. When he spilled the old High King’s blood, the droplets turned into moths, which fluttered through the air for a few stunning moments before seeming to die. I thought they were all gone, but it seems that a few follow him still, a reminder of his sins.

“Our Lady Jude of the Court of Shadows,” he says, as though he believes that will charm me. “May I offer you a cup?”

There is a movement in one of the other cells. I consider what his tea parties are like when I’m not around.

I’m not pleased he’s aware of the Court of Shadows or my association with them, but I can’t be entirely surprised, either—Prince Dain, our spymaster and employer, was Balekin’s brother. And if Balekin knew about the Court of Shadows, he probably recognized one of them as they stole the Blood Crown and got it into my brother’s hands so he could place it on Cardan’s head.

Balekin has good reason to not be entirely pleased to see me.

“I must regretfully refuse tea,” I say. “I won’t be here long. You sent the High King some correspondence. Something about a deal? A bargain? I am here on his behalf to hear whatever it is you wish to say to him.”

His smile seems to twist in on itself, to grow ugly. “You think me

diminished," Balekin says. "But I am still a prince of Faerie, even here. Vulciber, won't you take my brother's seneschal and give her a smack in her pretty, little face?"

The strike comes openhanded, faster than I would have guessed, the sound of the slap shockingly loud as his palm connects with my skin. It leaves my cheek stinging and me furious.

My knife is back in my right hand, its twin in my left.

Vulciber wears an eager expression.

My pride urges me to fight, but he's bigger than me and in a space familiar to him. This would be no mere sparring contest. Still, the urge to best him, the urge to wipe the expression from his smug face, is overwhelming.

Almost overwhelming. *Pride is for knights*, I remind myself, *not for spies*.

"My *pretty face*," I murmur to Balekin, putting away my knives slowly. I stretch my fingers to touch my cheek. Vulciber hit me hard enough for my own teeth to have cut the inside of my mouth. I spit blood onto the stone floor. "Such flattery. I cheated you out of a crown, so I guess I can allow for some hard feelings. Especially when they come with a compliment. Just don't try me again."

Vulciber looks abruptly unsure of himself.

Balekin takes a sip of his tea. "You speak very freely, mortal girl."

"And why shouldn't I?" I say. "I speak with the High King's voice. Do you think he's interested in coming all the way down here, away from the palace and its pleasures, to treat with the elder brother at whose hands he suffered?"

Prince Balekin leans forward in his chair. "I wonder what you think you mean."

"And I wonder what message you'd like me to give the High King."

Balekin regards me—no doubt one of my cheeks must be flushed. He takes another careful sip of tea. "I have heard that for mortals, the feeling of falling in love is very like the feeling of fear. Your heart beats fast. Your senses are heightened. You grow light-headed, maybe even dizzy." He looks at me. "Is that right? It would explain much about your kind if it's possible to mistake the two."

"I've never been in love," I tell him, refusing to be rattled.

"And of course, you can lie," he says. "I can see why Cardan would find that helpful. Why Dain would have, too. It was clever of him to have brought you into his little gang of misfits. Clever to see that Madoc would spare you. Whatever else you could say about my brother, he was marvelously unsentimental.

"For my part, I barely thought of you at all, and when I did, it was only to

goad Cardan with your accomplishments. But you have what Cardan never did: *ambition*. Had I only seen that, I would have a crown now. But I think you've misjudged me, too."

"Oh?" I know I am not going to like this.

"I won't give you the message I meant for Cardan. It will come to him another way, and it will come to him soon."

"Then you waste both our time," I say, annoyed. I have come all the way here, been hit, and frightened for nothing.

"Ah, time," he says. "You're the only one short on that, mortal." He nods at Vulciber. "You may escort her out."

"Let's go," the guard says, giving me a none-too-gentle shove toward the steps. As I ascend, I glance back at Balekin's face, severe in the green torchlight. He resembles Cardan too much for my comfort.

I am partway up when a long-fingered hand reaches out from between the bars and grips my ankle. Startled, I slip, scraping my palms and banging my knees as I go sprawling on the stairs. The old stab wound at the center of my left hand throbs suddenly. I barely catch myself before I tumble all the way down the steps.

Beside me is the thin face of a faerie woman. Her tail curls around one of the bars. Short horns sweep back from her brow. "I knew your Eva," she says to me, eyes glittering in the gloom. "I knew your mother. Knew so many of her little secrets."

I push myself to my feet and climb the steps as quickly as I can, my heart racing faster than when I thought I was going to have to fight Vulciber in the dark. My breath comes in short, rapid gasps that make my lungs hurt.

At the top of the stairs, I pause to wipe my stinging palms against my doublet and try to get myself under control.

"Ah," I say to Vulciber when my breathing has calmed a little. "I nearly forgot. The High King gave me a scroll of commands. There are a few changes in how he wishes his brother to be treated. They're outside in my saddlebags. If you could just follow me—"

Vulciber looks a question at the guard who sent him to guide me to Balekin.

"Go quickly," the shadowy figure says.

And so Vulciber accompanies me through the great door of the Tower of Forgetting. Illuminated by the moon, the black rocks shine with salt spray, a glittering coating, like that on sugared fruit. I try to focus on the guard and not the sound of my mother's name, which I haven't heard in so many years that, for a moment, I didn't know why it was important to me.

Eva.

“That horse has only a bit and bridle,” Vulciber says, frowning at the black steed tied to the wall. “But you said—”

I stab him in the arm with a little pin I kept hidden in the lining of my doublet. “I lied.”

It takes some doing to haul him up and sling him over the back of the horse. She is trained with familiar military commands, including kneeling, which helps. I move as quickly as I can, for fear that one of the guards will come to check on us, but I am lucky. No one comes before we are up and moving.

Another reason to ride to Insweal, rather than walk—you never know what you might be bringing back with you.

CHAPTER 3

"You're styling yourself as a spymaster," the Roach says, looking over me and then my prisoner. "That ought to include being shrewd. Relying only on yourself is a good way to get got. Next time, take a member of the royal guard. Take one of us. Take a cloud of sprites or a drunken spriggan. Just take someone."

"Watching my back is the perfect opportunity to stick a knife in it," I remind him.

"Spoken like Madoc himself," says the Roach with an irritated sniff of his long, twisted nose. He sits at the wooden table in the Court of Shadows, the lair of spies deep in the tunnels under the Palace of Elfhame. He is burning the tips of crossbow bolts in a flame, then liberally coating them with a sticky tar. "If you don't trust us, just say so. We came to one arrangement, we can come to another."

"That's not what I mean," I say, putting my head down on my hands for a long moment. I do trust them. I wouldn't have spoken so freely if I didn't, but I am letting my irritation show.

I am sitting across from the Roach, eating cheese and buttered bread with apples. It's the first food I've had that day, and my belly is making hungry noises, another reminder of the way my body is unlike theirs. Faerie stomachs don't gurgle.

Perhaps hunger is why I am being snappish. My cheek is stinging, and though I turned the situation on its head, it was a nearer thing than I'd like to admit. Plus, I still don't know what Balekin wanted to tell Cardan.

The more exhausted I let myself get, the more I'll slip up. Human bodies betray us. They get starved and sick and run down. I know it, and yet there is always so much more to do.

Beside us, Vulciber sits, tied to a chair and blindfolded.

"Do you want some cheese?" I ask him.

The guard grunts noncommittally but pulls against his bindings at the attention. He's been awake for several minutes and grown visibly more worried the longer we haven't spoken to him.

"What am I doing here?" he finally shouts, rocking his chair back and forth. "Let me go!" The chair goes over, slamming him against the ground, where he lies on his side. He begins to struggle against the ropes in earnest.

The Roach shrugs, gets up, and pulls off Vulciber's blindfold. "Greetings," he says.

On the other side of the room, the Bomb is cleaning beneath her fingernails with a long, half-moon knife. The Ghost is sitting in a corner so quietly that occasionally he seems not to be there at all. A few more of the new recruits look on, interested in the proceedings—a boy with sparrow wings, three spriggans, a sluagh girl. I am not used to an audience.

Vulciber stares at the Roach, at his goblin-green skin and eyes that reflect orange, his long nose and the single tuft of hair on his head. He takes in the room.

"The High King won't allow this," Vulciber says.

I give him a sad smile. "The High King doesn't know, and you're unlikely to tell him once I cut out your tongue."

Watching his fear ripen fills me with an almost voluptuous satisfaction. I, who have had little power in my life, must be on guard against that feeling. Power goes to my head too quickly, like faerie wine.

"Let me guess," I say, turning backward in my chair to face him, calculated coolness in my gaze. "You thought you could strike me, and there would be no consequences."

He shrinks a bit at my words. "What do you want?"

"Who says I want anything particular?" I counter. "Maybe just a little payback…"

As if we rehearsed it, the Roach pulls out a particularly nasty blade from his belt and holds it over Vulciber. He grins down at the guard.

The Bomb looks up from her nails, a small smile on her lips as she watches the Roach. "I guess the show is about to start."

Vulciber fights against his bonds, head lashing back and forth. I hear the wood of the chair crack, but he doesn't get free. After several heavy breaths, he slumps.

“Please,” he whispers.

I touch my chin as though a thought has just occurred to me. “Or you could help us. Balekin wanted to make a bargain with Cardan. You could tell me about that.”

“I know nothing of it,” he says desperately.

“Too bad.” I shrug and pick up another piece of cheese, shoving it into my mouth.

He takes a look at the Roach and the ugly knife. “But I know a secret. It’s worth more than my life, more than whatever Balekin wanted with Cardan. If I tell it, will you give me your oath that I will leave here tonight unharmed?”

The Roach looks at me, and I shrug. “Well enough,” the Roach says. “If the secret is all you claim, and if you’ll swear never to reveal you had a visit to the Court of Shadows, then tell us and we’ll send you on your way.”

“The Queen of the Undersea,” Vulciber says, eager to speak now. “Her people crawl up the rocks at night and whisper to Balekin. They slip into the Tower, although we don’t know how, and leave him shells and shark teeth. Messages are being exchanged, but we can’t decipher them. There are whispers Orlagh intends to break her treaty with the land and use the information Balekin is giving her to ruin Cardan.”

Of all the threats to Cardan’s reign, the Undersea wasn’t one I was expecting. The Queen of the Undersea has a single daughter—Nicasia, fostered on land and one of Cardan’s awful friends. Like Locke, Nicasia and I have a history. Also like Locke, it isn’t a good one.

But I thought that Cardan’s friendship with Nicasia meant Orlagh was happy he was on the throne.

“Next time one of these exchanges happen,” I say, “come straight to me. And if you hear anything else you think I’d be interested in, you come and tell me that, too.”

“That’s not what we agreed,” Vulciber protests.

“True enough,” I tell him. “You’ve told us a tale, and it is a good one. We’ll let you go tonight. But I can reward you better than some murderous prince who does not and will never have the High King’s favor. There are better positions than guarding the Tower of Forgetting—yours for the taking. There’s gold. There’re all the rewards that Balekin can promise but is unlikely to deliver.”

He gives me a strange look, probably trying to judge whether, given that he hit me and I poisoned him, it is still possible for us to be allies. “You can lie,” he says finally.

“I’ll guarantee the rewards,” the Roach says. He reaches over and cuts Vulciber’s bindings with his scary knife.

“Promise me a post other than in the Tower,” says Vulciber, rubbing his wrists and pushing himself to his feet, “and I shall obey you as though you were the High King himself.”

The Bomb laughs at that, with a wink in my direction. They do not explicitly know that I have the power to command Cardan, but they know we have a bargain that involves my doing most of the work and the Court of Shadows acting directly for the crown and getting paid directly, too.

I’m playing the High King in her little pageant, Cardan said once in my hearing. The Roach and the Bomb laughed; the Ghost didn’t.

Once Vulciber exchanges promises with us, and the Roach leads him, blindfolded, into the passageways out of the Nest, the Ghost comes to sit beside me.

“Come spar,” he says, taking a piece of apple off my plate. “Burn off some of that simmering rage.”

I give a little laugh. “Don’t disparage. It’s not easy to keep the temperature so consistent,” I tell him.

“Nor so high,” he returns, watching me carefully with hazel eyes. I know there’s human in his lineage—I can see it in the shape of his ears and his sandy hair, unusual in Faerie. But he hasn’t told me his story, and here, in this place of secrets, I feel uncomfortable asking.

Although the Court of Shadows does not follow me, the four of us have made a vow together. We have promised to protect the person and office of the High King, to ensure the safety and prosperity of Elfhame for the hope of less bloodshed and more gold. So we’ve sworn. So they let me swear, even though my words don’t bind me the way theirs do, by magic. I am bound by honor and by their faith in my having some.

“The king himself has had audience with the Roach thrice in this last fortnight. He’s learning to pick pockets. If you’re not careful, he’ll make a better slyfoot than you.” The Ghost has been added to the High King’s personal guard, which allows him to keep Cardan safe but also to know his habits.

I sigh. It’s full dark, and I have much I ought to do before dawn. And yet it is hard to ignore this invitation, which pricks at my pride.

Especially now, with the new spies overhearing my answer. We recruited more members, displaced after the royal murders. Every prince and princess employed a few, and now we employ them all. The spriggans are as cagey as cats but excellent at ferreting out scandal. The sparrow boy is as green as I once was. I would like the expanding Court of Shadows to believe I don’t back down from a challenge.

“The real difficulty will come when someone tries to teach our king his

way around a blade," I say, thinking of Balekin's frustrations on that front, of Cardan's declaration that his one virtue was that he was no murderer.

Not a virtue I share.

"Oh?" says the Ghost. "Maybe you'll have to teach it to him."

"Come," I say, getting up. "Let's see if I can teach *you*."

At that, the Ghost laughs outright. Madoc raised me to the sword, but until I joined the Court of Shadows, I knew only one way of fighting. The Ghost has studied longer and knows far more.

I follow him into the Milkwood, where black-thorned bees hum in their hives high in the white-barked trees. The root men are asleep. The sea laps at the rocky edges of the isle. The world feels hushed as we face each other. As tired as I am, my muscles remember better than I do.

I draw Nightfell. The Ghost comes at me fast, sword point diving toward my heart, and I knock it away, sweeping my blade down his side.

"Not so out of practice as I feared," he says as we trade blows, each of us testing the other.

I do not tell him of the drills I do before the mirror, just as I do not tell him of all the other ways I attempt to correct my defects.

As the High King's seneschal and the de facto ruler, I have much to study. Military commitments, messages from vassals, demands from every corner of Elfhame written in as many languages. Only a few months ago, I was still attending lessons, still doing homework for scholars to correct. The idea that I can untangle everything seems as impossible as spinning straw into gold, but each night I stay awake until the sun is high in the sky, trying my hardest to do just that.

That's the problem with a puppet government: It's not going to run itself.

Adrenaline may turn out not to be a replacement for experience.

Done with testing me on the basics, the Ghost begins the real fight. He dances over the grass lightly, so that there is barely a sound from his footfalls. He strikes and strikes again, posing a dizzying offensive. I parry desperately, my every thought given over to this, the fight. My worries fade into the background as my attention sharpens. Even my exhaustion blows off me like fluff from the back of a dandelion.

It's glorious.

We trade blows, back and forth, advancing and retreating.

"Do you miss the mortal world?" he asks. I am relieved to discover his breath isn't coming entirely easily.

"No," I say. "I hardly knew it."

He attacks again, his sword a silvery fish darting through the sea of the night.

Watch the blade, not the soldier, Madoc told me many times. *Steel never deceives.*

Our weapons slam together again and again as we circle each other. “You must remember something.”

I think of my mother’s name whispered through the bars in the Tower.

He feigns to one side, and, distracted, I realize too late what he’s doing. The flat of his blade hits my shoulder. He could have cut open my skin if he hadn’t turned his blow at the last moment, and as it is, it’s going to bruise.

“Nothing important,” I say, trying to ignore the pain. Two can play at the game of distraction. “Perhaps your memories are better than mine. What do you recall?”

He shrugs. “Like you, I was born there.” He stabs, and I turn the blade. “But things were different a hundred years ago, I suppose.”

I raise my eyebrows and parry another strike, dancing out of his range. “Were you a happy child?”

“I was magic. How could I fail to be?”

“*Magic*,” I say, and with a twist of my blade—a move of Madoc’s—I knock the sword out of the Ghost’s hand.

He blinks at me. Hazel eyes. Crooked mouth opening in astonishment. “You…”

“Got better?” I supply, pleased enough not to mind my aching shoulder. It feels like a win, but if we were really fighting, that shoulder wound would have probably made my final move impossible. Still, his surprise thrills me nearly as much as my victory.

“It’s good Oak will grow up as we didn’t,” I say after a moment. “Away from the Court. Away from all this.”

The last time I saw my little brother, he was sitting at the table in Vivi’s apartment, learning multiplication as though it were a riddle game. He was eating string cheese. He was laughing.

“*When the king returns*,” the Ghost says, quoting from a ballad. “*Rose petals will scatter across his path, and his footfalls will bring an end to wrath.* But how will your Oak rule if he has as few memories of Faerie as we have of the mortal world?”

The elation of the win ebbs. The Ghost gives me a small smile, as though to draw the sting of his words.

I go to a nearby stream and plunge my hands in, glad of the cold water. I cup it to my lips and gulp gratefully, tasting pine needles and silt.

I think of Oak, my little brother. An utterly normal faerie child, neither particularly called to cruelty nor free of it. Used to being coddled, used to being whisked away from distress by a fussing Oriana. Now growing used to

sugary cereal and cartoons and a life without treachery. I consider the rush of pleasure that I felt at my temporary triumph over the Ghost, the thrill of being the power behind the throne, the worrying satisfaction I had at making Vulciber squirm. Is it better that Oak is without those impulses or impossible for him to ever rule unless he has them?

And now that I have found in myself a taste for power, will I be loath to give it up?

I wipe wet hands over my face, pushing back those thoughts.

There is only now. There is only tomorrow and tonight and now and soon and never.

We start back, walking together as the dawn turns the sky gold. In the distance I hear the bellow of a deer and what sounds like drums.

Halfway there, the Ghost tips his head in a half bow. “You beat me tonight. I won’t let that happen again.”

“If you say so,” I tell him with a grin.

By the time I get back to the palace, the sun is up and I want nothing more than sleep. But when I make it to my apartments, I find someone standing in front of the door.

My twin sister, Taryn.

“You’ve got a bruise coming up on your cheek,” she says, the first words she’s spoken to me in five months.

CHAPTER 4

Taryn's hair is dressed with a halo of laurel, and her gown is a soft brown, woven through with green and gold. She has dressed to accentuate the curves of her hips and chest, both unusual in Faerie, where bodies are thin to the point of attenuation. The clothes suit her, and there is something new in the set of her shoulders that suits her as well.

She is a mirror, reflecting someone I could have been but am not.

"It's late," I say clumsily, unlocking the door to my rooms. "I didn't expect anyone to be up." It's well past dawn by now. The whole palace is quiet and likely to stay so until the afternoon, when pages race through the halls and cooks light fires. Courtiers will rise from their beds much later, at full dark.

For all my wanting to see her, now that she is in front of me, I am unnerved. She must want something to have put in all this effort all of a sudden.

"I've come twice before," she says, following me inside. "You weren't here. This time I decided to wait, even if I waited all day."

I light the lamps; though it is bright outside, I am too deep in the palace to have windows in my rooms. "You look well."

She waves off my stiff politeness. "Are we going to fight forever? I want you to wear a flower crown and dance at my wedding. Vivienne is coming from the mortal world. She's bringing Oak. Madoc promises he won't argue with you. Please say you'll come."

Vivi is bringing Oak? I groan internally and wonder if there's a chance of talking her out of it. Maybe it's because she's my elder sister, but sometimes

it’s hard for her to take me particularly seriously.

I sink down on the couch, and Taryn does the same.

I consider again the puzzle of her being here. Of whether I should demand an apology or if I should let her skip past all that, the way she clearly wants.

“Okay,” I tell her, giving in. I’ve missed her too much to risk losing her again. For the sake of us being sisters, I will try to forget what it felt like to kiss Locke. For my own sake, I will try to forget that she knew about the games he was playing with me during their courtship.

I will dance at her wedding, though I am afraid it will feel like dancing on knives.

She reaches into the bag by her feet and pulls out my stuffed cat and snake. “Here,” she says. “I didn’t think you meant to leave them behind.”

They’re relics of our old mortal life, talismans. I take them and press them to my chest, as I might a pillow. Right now, they feel like reminders of all my vulnerabilities. They make me feel like a child, playing a grown-up game.

I hate her a little for bringing them.

They’re a reminder of our shared past—a deliberate reminder, as though she couldn’t trust me to remember on my own. They make me feel all my exposed nerves when I am trying so hard not to feel anything.

When I don’t speak for a long moment, she goes on. “Madoc misses you, too. You were always his favorite.”

I snort. “Vivi is his heir. His firstborn. The one he came to the mortal world to find. She’s his *favorite*. Then there’s you—who lives at home and didn’t betray him.”

“I’m not saying you’re *still* his favorite,” Taryn says with a laugh. “Although he was a little proud of you when you outmaneuvered him to get Cardan onto the throne. Even if it was stupid. I thought you hated Cardan. I thought we both hated him.”

“I did,” I say, nonsensically. “I do.”

She gives me a strange look. “I thought you wanted to punish Cardan for everything he’s done.”

I think of his horror at his own desire when I brought my mouth to his, the dagger in my hand, edge against his skin. The toe-curling, corrosive pleasure of that kiss. It felt as though I *was* punishing him—punishing him and myself at the same time.

I hated him so much.

Taryn is dredging up every feeling I want to ignore, everything I want to pretend away.

“We made an agreement,” I tell her, which is close to the truth. “Cardan lets me be his advisor. I have a position and power, and Oak is out of danger.”

I want to tell her the rest, but I don't dare. She might tell Madoc, might even tell Locke. I cannot share my secrets with her, even to brag.

And I admit that I desperately want to brag.

"And in return, you gave him the crown of Faerie.…" Taryn is looking at me as though struck by my presumption. After all, who was I, a mortal girl, to decide who should sit on the throne of Elfhame?

We get power by taking it.

Little does she know how much more presumptuous I have been. I stole the crown of Faerie, I want to tell her. The High King, Cardan, our old enemy, is mine to command. But of course I cannot say those words. Sometimes it seems dangerous even to think them. "Something like that," I say instead.

"It must be a demanding job, being his advisor." She looks around the room, forcing me to see it as she does. I have taken over these chambers, but I have no servants save for the palace staff, whom I seldom allow inside. Cups of tea rest on bookshelves, saucers lie on the floor along with dirty plates of fruit rinds and bread crusts. Clothes are scattered where I drop them after tugging them off. Books and papers rest on every surface. "You're unwinding yourself like a spool. What happens when there's no more thread?"

"Then I spin more," I say, carrying the metaphor.

"Let me help you," she says, brightening.

My brows rise. "You want to make thread?"

She rolls her eyes at me. "Oh, come on. I can do things you don't have time for. I see you in Court. You have perhaps two good jackets. I could bring some of your old gowns and jewels over—Madoc wouldn't notice, and even if he did, he wouldn't mind."

Faerie runs on debt, on promises and obligations. Having grown up here, I understand what she's offering—a gift, a boon, instead of an apology.

"I have *three* jackets," I say.

She raises both brows. "Well, then I guess you're all set."

I can't help wondering at her coming now, just after Locke has been made Master of Revels. And with her still in Madoc's house, I wonder where her political loyalties lie.

I am ashamed of those thoughts. I don't want to think of her the way I have to think about everyone else. She is my twin, and I missed her, and I hoped she would come, and now she has.

"Okay," I say. "If you want to, bringing over my old stuff would be great."

"Good!" Taryn stands. "And you ought to acknowledge what an enormous act of forbearance it was for me not to ask where you came from tonight or how you got hurt."

At that, my smile is instant and real.

She reaches out a finger to pet the plush body of my stuffed snake. “I love you, you know. Just like Mr. Hiss. And neither of us wants to be left behind.”

“Good night,” I tell her, and when she kisses my bruised cheek, I hug her to me, brief and fierce.

Once she’s gone, I take my stuffed animals and seat them next to me on the rug. Once, they were a reminder that there was a time before Faerieland, when things were normal. Once, they were a comfort to me. I take a long last look, and then, one by one, I feed them to the fire.

I’m no longer a child, and I don’t need comfort.

Once that is done, I line up little shimmering glass vials in front of me.

Mithridatism, it is called, the process by which one takes a little bit of poison to inoculate oneself against a full dose of it. I started a year ago, another way for me to correct for my defects.

There are still side effects. My eyes shine too brightly. The half moons of my fingernails are bluish, as though my blood doesn’t get quite enough oxygen. My sleep is strange, full of too-vivid dreams.

A drop of the bloodred liquid of the blusher mushroom, which causes potentially lethal paralysis. A petal of deathsweet, which can cause a sleep that lasts a hundred years. A sliver of wraithberry, which makes the blood race and induces a kind of wildness before stopping the heart. And a seed of everapple—*faerie fruit*—which muddies the minds of mortals.

I feel dizzy and a little sick when the poison hits my blood, but I would be sicker still if I skipped a dose. My body has acclimated, and now it craves what it should revile.

An apt metaphor for other things.

I crawl to the couch and lie there. As I do, Balekin’s words wash over me: *I have heard that for mortals the feeling of falling in love is very like the feeling of fear. Your heart beats fast. Your senses are heightened. You grow light-headed, maybe even dizzy. Is that right?*

I am not sure I sleep, but I do dream.

CHAPTER 5

I am tossing fitfully in a nest of blankets and papers and scrolls on the rug before the fire when the Ghost wakes me. My fingers are stained with ink and wax. I look around, trying to recall when I got up, what I was writing and to whom.

The Roach stands in the open panel of the secret passageway into my rooms, watching me with his reflecting, inhuman eyes.

My skin is sweaty and cold. My heart races.

I can still taste poison, bitter and cloying, on my tongue.

“He’s at it again,” the Ghost says. I do not have to ask whom he means. I may have tricked Cardan into wearing the crown, but I have not yet learned the trick of making him behave with the gravitas of a king.

While I was off getting information, he was off with Locke. I knew there would be trouble.

I scrub my face with the calloused heel of my hand. “I’m up,” I say.

Still in my clothes from the night before, I brush off my jacket and hope for the best. Walking into my bedroom, I scrape my hair back, knotting it with a bit of leather and covering the mess with a velvet cap.

The Roach frowns at me. “You’re wrinkled. His Majesty isn’t supposed to go around with a seneschal who looks like she just rolled out of bed.”

“Val Moren had sticks in his hair for the last decade,” I remind him, taking a few partially dried mint leaves from my cabinet and chewing on them to take the staleness from my breath. The last High King’s seneschal was mortal, as I am, fond of somewhat unreliable prophecy, and widely considered to be

mad. “Probably the *same* sticks.”

The Roach harrumphs. “Val Moren’s a poet. Rules are different for poets.”

Ignoring him, I follow the Ghost into the secret passage that leads to the heart of the palace, pausing only to check that my knives are still tucked away in the folds of my clothes. The Ghost’s footfalls are so silent that when there’s not enough light for my human eyes to see, I might as well be entirely alone.

The Roach does not follow us. He heads in the opposite direction with a grunt.

“Where are we going?” I ask the darkness.

“His apartments,” the Ghost tells me as we emerge into a hall, a staircase below where Cardan sleeps. “There’s been some kind of disturbance.”

I have difficulty imagining what trouble the High King got into in his own rooms, but it doesn’t take long to discover. When we arrive, I spot Cardan resting among the wreckage of his furniture. Curtains ripped from their rods, the frames of paintings cracked, their canvases kicked through, furniture broken. A small fire smolders in a corner, and everything stinks of smoke and spilled wine.

Nor is he alone. On a nearby couch are Locke and two beautiful faeries—a boy and a girl—one with ram’s horns, the other with long ears that come to tufted points, like those of an owl. All of them are in an advanced state of undress and inebriation. They watch the room burn with a kind of grim fascination.

Servants cower in the hall, unsure if they should brave the king’s wrath and clean up. Even his guards seem intimidated. They stand awkwardly in the hall outside his massive doors—one barely hanging from its hinges—ready to protect the High King from any threat that isn’t himself.

“Carda—” I remember myself and sink into a bow. “Your *Infernal* Majesty.”

He turns and, for a moment, seems to look through me, as though he has no idea who I am. His mouth is painted gold, and his pupils are large with intoxication. Then his lip lifts in a familiar sneer. “You.”

“Yes,” I say. “Me.”

He gestures with the skin. “Have a drink.” His wide-sleeved linen hunting shirt hangs open. His feet are bare. I guess I should be glad he’s wearing pants.

“I have no head for liquor, my lord,” I say, entirely truthfully, narrowing my eyes in warning.

“Am I not your king?” he asks, daring me to contradict him. Daring me to refuse him. Obediently, because we are in front of people, I take the skin and tip it against my closed lips, pretending to take a long swallow.

I can tell he's not fooled, but he doesn't push it.

"Everyone else may leave us." I indicate the faeries on the couch, including Locke. "You. Move. Now."

The two I do not know turn toward Cardan beseechingly, but he barely seems to notice them and does not countermand me. After a long moment, they sulkily unfold themselves and see themselves out through the broken door.

Locke takes longer to get up. He smiles at me as he goes, an insinuating smile that I can't believe I ever found charming. He looks at me as though we share secrets, although we don't. We don't share anything.

I think of Taryn waiting in my rooms as this merriment began. I wonder if she could hear it. I wonder if she's used to staying up late with Locke, watching things burn.

The Ghost shakes his sandy head at me, eyes bright with amusement. He is in palace livery. To the knights in the hall and anyone else who might be looking, he is just another member of the High King's personal guard.

"I'll make sure everyone stays where they're put," the Ghost says, leaving through the doorway and issuing what sound like orders to the other knights.

"Well?" I say, looking around.

Cardan shrugs, sitting on the newly unoccupied couch. He picks at a piece of horsehair stuffing that is sticking out through the torn fabric. His every movement is languorous. It feels dangerous to rest my gaze on him for too long, as though he is so thoroughly debauched that it might be contagious. "There were more guests," he says, as though that's any explanation. "They left."

"I can't imagine why," I say, voice as dry as I can make it.

"They told me a story," Cardan says. "Would you like to hear it? Once upon a time, there was a human girl stolen away by faeries, and because of that, she swore to destroy them."

"Wow," I say. "That really is a testament to how much you suck as a king, to believe your reign is capable of destroying Faerie."

Still, the words unnerve. I don't want my motives to be considered. I ought not to be thought of as influential. I ought not to be thought of at all.

The Ghost returns from the hall, leaning the door against the frame, closing it as much as is possible. His hazel eyes are shadowed.

I turn back to Cardan. "That little story is not why I was sent for. What happened?"

"This," he says, and staggers into the room with a bed in it. There, embedded deeply in the splintered wood of the headboard are two black bolts.

"You're mad that one of your guests shot your bed?" I guess.

He laughs. “They weren’t aiming for the bed.” He pulls aside his shirt, and I see the hole in the cloth and a stripe of raw skin along his side.

My breath catches.

“Who did this?” the Ghost demands. And then, looking more closely at Cardan: “And why aren’t the guards outside more upset? They don’t behave as though they failed to prevent an assassination attempt.”

Cardan shrugs. “I believe the guards think I was taking aim at my guests.”

I take a step closer and notice a few drops of blood on one of the disarranged pillows. There are a few scattered white flowers, too, seeming to grow out of the fabric. “Did someone else get hit?”

He nods. “The bolt hit her leg, and she was screaming and not making very much in the way of sense. So you see how someone might conclude that I shot her when no one else was around. The actual shooter went back into the walls.” He narrows his eyes at the Ghost and me, tilting his head, accusation burning in his gaze. “There seems to be some sort of secret passageway.”

The Palace of Elfhame is built into a hill, with High King Eldred’s old apartments at the very center, their walls crawling with roots and blooming vines. The whole Court assumed that Cardan would take those, but he moved to the farthest place possible from them, at the very peak of the hill, with crystal panes set into the earth like windows. Before his coronation, they had belonged to the least favored of the royal household. Now the residents of the palace scramble to rearrange themselves so they can be closer to the new High King. And Eldred’s rooms—abandoned and too grand for anyone else to rightfully claim—remain empty.

I know of only a few ways into Cardan’s rooms—a single, large, thick-glassed window enchanted never to break, a pair of double doors, and apparently, a secret passage.

“It’s not on the map of tunnels we have,” I tell him.

“Ah,” he says. I am not sure he believes me.

“Did you see who shot at you? And why didn’t you tell your own guards what really happened?” I demand.

He gives me an exasperated look. “I saw a blur of black. And as to why I didn’t correct the guards—I was protecting you and the Court of Shadows. I didn’t think you would want the whole royal guard in your secret passageways!”

To that, I have no answer. The disturbing thing about Cardan is how well he plays the fool to disguise his own cleverness.

Opposite the bed is a cabinet built into the wall, taking the whole length of it. It has a painted clock face on the front, with constellations instead of numbers. The arms of the clock are pointed toward a configuration of stars

prophesying a particularly amorous lover.

Inside, it appears merely a wardrobe overstuffed with Cardan's clothing. I pull them out, letting them fall to the floor in a pile of velvet cuffs, satin, and leather. From the bed, Cardan makes a sound of mock distress.

I press my ear to the wood backing, listening for the whistle of wind and feeling for a draft. The Ghost does the same on the other side. His fingers find a latch, and a thin door springs open.

Although I knew the palace was riddled with passageways, I never would have dreamed one was in Cardan's very bedroom. And yet… I should have combed over every inch of wall. I could have, at the least, asked one of the other spies to do so. But I avoided it, because I avoided being alone with Cardan.

"Stay with the king," I tell the Ghost and, picking up a candle, head into the darkness beyond the wall, avoiding being alone with him again.

The tunnel is dim, lit throughout with golden hands holding torches that burn with a smokeless green flame. The stone floor is covered in a threadbare carpet, a strangely decorative detail for a secret passageway.

A few feet in, I find the crossbow. It is not the compact thing that I have carried. It's massive, more than half my size, obviously dragged here—I can see the way the carpet is rucked up in the direction whence it came.

Whoever shot it, shot it from here.

I jump over and keep going. I would expect a passageway like this to have many branches, but this one has none. It dips down at intervals, like a ramp, and turns in on itself, but it runs in only one direction—straight ahead. I hurry, faster and faster, my hand cupped around my candle flame to keep it from going out.

Then I come to a heavy wooden slab carved with the royal crest, the same one stamped in Cardan's signet ring.

I give it a push, and it shifts, clearly on a track. There's a bookshelf on the other side.

Until now, I have only heard stories of the great majesty of High King Eldred's rooms in the very heart of the palace, just above the brugh, the great branches of the throne itself snaking through his walls. Although I've never seen them before, the descriptions make it impossible to think I am anywhere else.

I walk through the enormous, cavernous rooms of Eldred's apartments, candle in one hand, a knife in the other.

And there, sitting on the High King's bed, her face stained with tears, is Nicasia.

Orlagh's daughter, Princess of the Undersea, fostered in the High King's

Court as part of the decades-ago treaty of peace between Orlagh and Eldred, Nicasia was once part of the foursome made up of Cardan and his closest, most awful friends. She was also his beloved, until she betrayed him for Locke. I haven't seen her by Cardan's side as often since he ascended to the throne, but ignoring her hardly seems like a killing offense.

Is this what Balekin was whispering about with the Undersea? Is this the way Cardan was to be ruined?

"*You?*" I shout. "*You* shot Cardan?"

"Don't tell him!" She glares at me furiously, wiping wet eyes. "And put away that knife."

Nicasia wears a robe, heavily embroidered with phoenixes and wrapped tightly around herself. Three earrings shine along her lobes, snaking up the ear all the way to their bluish webbed points. Her hair has gotten darker since I saw it last. It was always the many colors of the sea, but now it is the sea in a storm—a deep greenish black.

"Are you out of your mind?" I yell. "You tried to assassinate the High King of Faerie."

"I didn't," she says. "I swear. I only meant to kill the girl he was with."

For a moment, I am too stunned by the cruelty and indifference to speak.

I take another look at her, at the robe she's clutching so tightly. With her words echoing in my head, I suddenly have a clear idea of what happened. "You thought to surprise him in his rooms."

"Yes," she says.

"But he wasn't alone…." I continue, hoping she will take up the tale.

"When I saw the crossbow on the wall, it didn't seem it would be so difficult to aim," she says, forgetting the part about dragging it up through the passageway, though it's heavy and awkward and that couldn't have been easy. I wonder how angry she was, how unthinking in her rage.

Of course, perhaps she was thinking entirely clearly.

"It's treason, you know," I say aloud. I am shaking, I realize. The aftereffects of believing someone tried to assassinate Cardan, of realizing he could have died. "They'll execute you. They'll make you dance yourself to death in iron shoes heated hot as pokers. You'll be lucky if they put you in the Tower of Forgetting."

"I am a Princess of the Undersea," she says haughtily, but I can see the shock on her face as my words register. "Exempt from the laws of the land. Besides, I told you I wasn't aiming for him."

Now I understand the worst of her behavior in school: She thought she could never be punished.

"Have you ever used a crossbow before?" I ask. "You put his life at risk.

He could have died. You idiot, *he could have died*."

"I told you—" she starts to repeat herself.

"Yes, yes, the compact between the sea and the land," I interrupt her, still furious. "But it just so happens I know that your mother is intent on breaking the treaty. You see, she will say it was between Queen Orlagh and High King Eldred, not Queen Orlagh and High King Cardan. It doesn't apply any longer. Which means it won't protect you."

At that, Nicasia gapes at me, afraid for the first time. "How did you know that?"

I wasn't sure, I think but do not say. *Now I am.*

"Let's assume I know everything," I tell her instead. "Everything. Always. Yet I'm willing to make a deal with you. I'll tell Cardan and the guard and the rest of them that the shooter got away, if you do something for me."

"Yes," she says before I even lay out the conditions, making the depth of her desperation clear. For a moment, a desire for vengeance rises in me. Once, she laughed at my humiliation. Now I could gloat before hers.

This is what power feels like, pure unfettered power. It's *great*.

"Tell me what Orlagh is planning," I say, pushing those thoughts away.

"I thought you knew everything already," she returns sulkily, shifting so she can rise from the bed, one hand still clutching her robe. I guess she is wearing very little, if anything, underneath.

You should have just gone in, I want to tell her, suddenly. *You should have told him to forget the other girl. Maybe he would have*.

"Do you want to buy my silence or not?" I ask, sitting down on the edge of the cushions. "We have only a certain amount of time before someone comes looking for me. If they see you, it will be too late for denials."

Nicasia gives a long-suffering sigh. "My mother says he is a young and weak king, that he lets others influence him too much." With that, she gives me a hard look. "She believes he will give in to her demands. If he does, then nothing will change."

"And if he doesn't…?"

Her chin comes up. "Then the truce between land and sea will be over, and it will be the land that suffers. The Isles of Elfhame will sink beneath the waves."

"And then what?" I ask. "Cardan is unlikely to make out with you if your mom floods the place."

"You don't understand. She wants us to be married. She wants me to be queen."

I am so surprised that, for a moment, I just stare at her, fighting down a kind of wild, panicky laughter. "You just *shot* him."

The look she gives me is beyond hatred. “Well, you murdered Valerian, did you not? I saw him the night he disappeared, and he was talking about you, talking about paying you back for stabbing him. People say he died at the coronation, but I don’t think he did.”

Valerian’s body is buried on Madoc’s estate, beside the stables, and if it was unearthed, I would have heard about it before now. She’s guessing.

And so what if I did, anyway? I am at the right hand of the High King of Faerie. He can pardon my every crime.

Still, the memory of it brings back the terror of fighting for my life. And it reminds me how she would have delighted in my death the way she delighted in everything Valerian did or tried to do to me. The way she delighted in Cardan’s hatred.

“Next time you catch *me* committing treason, you can force me to tell you *my* secrets,” I say. “But right now I’d rather hear what your mother intends to do with Balekin.”

“Nothing,” Nicasia says.

“And here I thought the Folk couldn’t lie,” I tell her.

Nicasia paces the room. Her feet are in slippers, the points of which curl up like ferns. “I’m not! Mother believes Cardan will agree to her terms. She’s just flattering Balekin. She lets him believe he’s important, but he won’t be. He won’t.”

I try to piece the plot together. “Because he’s her backup plan if Cardan refuses to marry you.”

My mind is reeling with the certainty that above all else, I cannot allow Cardan to marry Nicasia. If he did, it would be impossible to prize both of them from the throne. Oak would never rule.

I would lose everything.

Her gaze narrows. “I’ve told you enough.”

“You think we’re still playing some kind of game,” I say.

“Everything’s a game, Jude,” she says. “You know that. And now it’s your move.” With those words, she heads toward the enormous doors and heaves one open. “Go ahead and tell them if you want, but you should know this—someone you trust has already betrayed you.” I hear the slap of her slippers on stone, and then the heavy slam of wood against the frame.

My thoughts are a riot of confusion as I make my way back through the passageway. Cardan is waiting for me in the main room of his chambers, reclining on a couch with a shrewd look on his face. His shirt is still open, but a fresh bandage covers his wound. Across his fingers, a coin dances—I recognize the trick as one of the Roach’s.

Someone you trust has already betrayed you.

From the shattered remains of the door, the Ghost looks in from where he stands with the High King's personal guard. He catches my eye.

"Well?" Cardan asks. "Have you discovered aught of my erstwhile murderer?"

I shake my head, not quite able to give speech to the lie. I look around at the wreckage of these rooms. There is no way for them to be secure, and they reek of smoke. "Come on," I say, taking Cardan's arm and pulling him unsteadily to his feet. "You can't sleep here."

"What happened to your cheek?" he asks, his gaze focusing blurrily on me. He's close enough that I can see his long lashes, the gold ring around the black of his iris.

"Nothing," I say.

He lets me squire him into the hall. As we emerge, the Ghost and the rest of the guards move immediately to stand at attention.

"At ease," says Cardan with a wave of his hand. "My seneschal is taking me somewhere. Worry not. I am sure she's got a plan of some kind."

His guards fall in line behind us, some of them frowning, as I half-lead him, half-carry him to my chambers. I hate taking him there, but I do not feel confident about his safety anywhere else.

He looks around in amazement, taking in the mess. "Where—Do you really sleep here? Perhaps you ought to set fire to your rooms as well."

"Maybe," I say, guiding him to my bed. It is strange to put my hand on his back. I can feel the warmth of his skin through the thin linen of his shirt, can feel the flex of his muscles.

It feels wrong to touch him as though he were a regular person, as though he weren't both the High King and also my enemy.

He needs no encouragement to sprawl on my mattress, head on the pillow, black hair spilling like crow feathers. He looks up at me with his night-colored eyes, beautiful and terrible all at once. "For a moment," he says, "I wondered if it wasn't you shooting bolts at me."

I make a face at him. "And what made you decide it wasn't?"

He grins up at me. "They missed."

I have said that he has the power to deliver a compliment and make it hurt. So, too, he can say something that ought to be insulting and deliver it in such a way that it feels like being truly seen.

Our eyes meet, and something dangerous sparks.

He hates you, I remind myself.

"Kiss me again," he says, drunk and foolish. "Kiss me until I am sick of it."

I feel those words, feel them like a kick to the stomach. He sees my

expression and laughs, a sound full of mockery. I can't tell which of us he's laughing at.

He hates you. Even if he wants you, he hates you.

Maybe he hates you the more for it.

After a moment, his eyes flutter closed. His voice falls to a whisper, as though he's talking to himself. "If you're the sickness, I suppose you can't also be the cure."

He drifts off to sleep, but I am wide awake.

CHAPTER 6

All through the morning I sit on a chair tipped back against the wall of my own bedroom. My father's sword is across my lap. My mind keeps going over her words.

You don't understand. She wants us to be married. She wants me to be queen.

Though I am across the floor from him, my gaze strays often to the bed and to the boy sleeping there.

His black eyes closed, his dark hair spilling over my pillow. At first, he could not seem to get comfortable, tangling his feet in the sheets, but eventually his breathing smoothed out and so did his movements. He is as ridiculously beautiful as ever, mouth soft, lips slightly parted, lashes so long that when his eyes are closed they rest against his cheek.

I am used to Cardan's beauty, but not to any vulnerability. It feels uncomfortable to see him without his fanciful clothes, without his acid tongue, and malicious gaze for armor.

Over the five months of our arrangement, I have tried to anticipate the worst. I have issued commands to prevent him from avoiding, ignoring, or getting rid of me. I've figured out rules to prevent mortals from being tricked into years-long servitude and gotten him to proclaim them.

But it never seems like enough.

I recall walking with him in the gardens of the palace at dusk. Cardan's hands were clasped behind his back, and he stopped to sniff the enormous globe of a white rose tipped with scarlet, just before it snapped at the air. He

grinned and lifted an eyebrow at me, but I was too nervous to smile back.

Behind him, at the edge of the garden, were a half dozen knights, his personal guard, to which the Ghost was already assigned.

Although I went over and over what I was about to tell him, I still felt like the fool who believes she can trick a dozen wishes from a single one if she just gets the phrasing right. “I am going to give you orders.”

“Oh, indeed,” he said. On his brow, the crown of Elfhame’s gold caught the light of the sunset.

I took a breath and began. “You’re never to deny me an audience or give an order to keep me from your side.”

“Whysoever would I want you to leave my side?” he asked, voice dry.

“And you may never order me arrested or imprisoned or killed,” I said, ignoring him. “Nor hurt. Nor even detained.”

“What about asking a servant to put a very sharp pebble in your boot?” he asked, expression annoyingly serious.

I gave him what I hoped was a scathing look in return. “Nor may you raise a hand against me yourself.”

He made a gesture in the air, as though all of this was ridiculously obvious, as though somehow giving him the commands out loud was an act of bad faith.

I went doggedly on. “Each evening, you will meet me in your rooms before dinner, and we will discuss policy. And if you know of harm to be done to me, you must warn me. You must try to prevent anyone from guessing how I control you. And no matter how much you hate being High King, you must pretend otherwise.”

“I don’t,” he said, looking up at the sky.

I turned to him, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t hate being High King,” he said. “Not always. I thought I would, and yet I do not. Make of that what you will.”

I was unnerved, because it was a lot easier when I knew he was not just unsuitable for, but also uninterested in, ruling. Whenever I looked at the Blood Crown on his head, I had to pretend it away.

It didn’t help how immediately he’d convinced the Gentry of his right to preside over them. His reputation for cruelty made them wary of crossing him. His license made them believe all delights were possible.

“So,” I said. “You enjoy being my pawn?”

He grinned lazily, as though he didn’t mind being baited. “For now.”

My gaze sharpened. “For far longer than that.”

“You’ve won yourself a year and a day,” he told me. “But a lot can happen in a year and a day. Give me all the commands you want, but you’ll never

think of everything.”

Once, I was the one to throw him off balance, the one to ignite his anger and shred his self-control, but somehow the tables turned. Every day since, I’ve felt the slippage.

As I gaze at him now, stretched out on my bed, I feel more off balance than ever.

The Roach sweeps into the room as late-afternoon light streams from the hill above us. On his shoulder is the hob-faced owl, once a messenger for Dain, now a messenger for the Court of Shadows. It goes by Snapdragon, although I don’t know if that’s a code name.

“The Living Council wants to see you,” the Roach says. Snapdragon blinks sleepy black eyes at me.

I groan.

“In truth,” he says, nodding toward the bed, “they want to see *him*, but it’s you they can order around.”

I stand and stretch. Then, strapping on the sheath, I head into the parlor of my apartments so as not to wake Cardan. “How’s the Ghost?”

“Resting,” the Roach says. “Lot of rumors flying around about last night, even among the palace guard. Gossips begin to spin their webs.”

I head to my bath chamber to clean myself up. I gargle with salty water and scrub my face and armpits with a cloth slathered in lemony verbena soap. I brush out my tangles, too exhausted to manage anything more complicated than that. “I guess you checked the passageway by now,” I call out.

“I did,” the Roach says. “And I see why it wasn’t on any of our maps—there’s no connection to the other passageways at any point down the length of it. I’m not even sure it was built when they were.”

I consider the painting of the clock and the constellations. The stars prophesying an amorous lover.

“Who slept there before Cardan?” I ask.

The Roach shrugs. “Several Folk. No one of particular note. Guests of the crown.”

“Lovers,” I say, finally putting it together. “The High King’s lovers who weren’t consorts.”

“Huh.” The Roach indicates Cardan with the lift of his chin in the direction of my bedroom. “And that’s the place *our* High King chose to

sleep?” The Roach gives me a significant look, as though I am supposed to know the answer to this puzzle, when I didn’t realize it was a puzzle at all.

“I don’t know,” I say.

He shakes his head. “You best get to that Council meeting.”

I can’t say it’s not a relief to know that when Cardan wakes, I won’t be there.

CHAPTER 7

The Living Council was assembled during Eldred’s time, ostensibly to help the High King make decisions, and they have calcified into a group difficult to oppose. It’s not so much that the ministers have raw individual power—although many are themselves formidable—but as a collective, it has the authority to make many smaller decisions regarding the running of the kingdom. The kind of small decisions that, taken together, could put even a king in a bind.

After the disrupted coronation and the murder of the royal family, after the irregularity with the crown, the Council is skeptical of Cardan’s youth and confused by my rise to power.

Snapdragon leads me to the meeting, beneath a braided dome of willow trees at a table of fossilized wood. The ministers watch me walk across the grass, and I look at them in turn—the Unseelie Minister, a troll with a thick head of shaggy hair with pieces of metal braided into it; the Seelie Minister, a green woman who looks like a mantis; the Grand General, Madoc; the Royal Astrologer, a very tall, dark-skinned man with a sculpted beard and celestial ornaments in the long fall of his navy blue hair; the Minister of Keys, a wizened old hob with ram’s horns and goat eyes; and the Grand Fool, who wears pale lavender roses on his head to match his purple motley.

All along the table are carafes of water and wine, dishes of dried fruit.

I lean over to one of the servants and send them for a pot of the strongest tea they can find. I will need it.

Randalin, the Minister of Keys, sits in the High King’s chair, the wooden

back of the throne-like seat is burned with the royal crest. I note the move—and the assumptions inherent in it. In the five months since assuming the mantle of High King, Cardan has not come to the Council. Only one chair is empty—between Madoc and Fala, the Grand Fool. I remain standing.

"Jude Duarte," says Randalin, fixing me with his goat eyes, "Where is the High King?"

Standing in front of them is always intimidating, and Madoc's presence makes it worse. He makes me feel like a child, overeager to say or do something clever. A part of me wants nothing more than to prove I am more than what they suppose me to be—the weak and silly appointee of a weak and silly king.

To prove that there is another reason for Cardan to have chosen a mortal seneschal than because I can lie for him.

"I am here in his place," I say. "To speak in his stead."

Randalin's gaze is withering. "There is a rumor that he shot one of his paramours last night. Is it true?"

A servant sets the asked-for pot of tea at my elbow, and I am grateful both for the fortification and for an excuse not to immediately answer.

"Today courtiers told me that girl wore an anklet of swinging rubies sent to her as an apology, but that she could not stand on her own," says Nihuar, the Seelie representative. She purses her small green lips. "I find everything about that to be in poor taste."

Fala the Fool laughs, clearly finding it to *his* taste. "Rubies for the spilling of her ruby-red blood."

That couldn't be true. Cardan would have had to arrange it in the time it took me to get from my rooms to the Council. But that doesn't mean someone else didn't arrange it on his behalf. Everyone is eager to help a king.

"You'd prefer he'd killed her outright?" I say. My skills in diplomacy are nowhere near as honed as my skills in aggravation. Besides, I'm tired.

"I wouldn't mind," says the Unseelie representative, Mikkel, with a chuckle. "Our new High King seems Unseelie through and through, and he will favor us, I think. We could give him a debauch better than the one his Master of Revels brags over, now that we know what he likes."

"There are other stories," continues Randalin. "That one of the guard shot High King Cardan to save that courtier's life. That she is bearing the royal heir. You must tell the High King that his Council stands ready to advise him so that his rule is not plagued by such tales."

"I'll be sure to do so," I say.

The Royal Astrologer, Baphen, gives me a searching look, as though reading correctly my intention not to talk to Cardan about any of this. "The

High King is tied to the land and to his subjects. A king is a living symbol, a beating heart, a star upon which Elfhame's future is written." He speaks quietly, and yet somehow his voice carries. "Surely you have noticed that since his reign began, the isles are different. Storms come in faster. Colors are a bit more vivid, smells are sharper.

"Things have been seen in the forests," he goes on. "Ancient things, long thought gone from the world, come to peer at him.

"When he becomes drunk, his subjects become tipsy without knowing why. When his blood falls, things grow. Why, High Queen Mab called Insmire, Insmoor, and Insweal from the sea. All the isles of Elfhame, formed in a single hour."

My heart speeds faster the longer that Baphen talks. My lungs feel as though they cannot get enough air. Because none of this can be describing Cardan. He cannot be connected to the land so profoundly, cannot be able to do all that and yet be under my control.

I think of the blood on his coverlet—and beside it, the scattered white flowers.

When his blood falls, things grow.

"And so you see," says Randalin, unaware that I am freaking out, "the High King's every decision changes Elfhame and influences its inhabitants. During Eldred's reign, when children were born, they were perforce brought before him to pledge themselves to the kingdom. But in the low Courts, some heirs were fostered in the mortal world, growing up outside of Eldred's reach. Those changeling children returned to rule without making vows to the Blood Crown. At least one Court has made such a changeling its queen. And who knows how many wild Folk managed to avoid making vows."

"We need to watch the Queen of the Undersea, too," I say. "She's got a plan and is going to move against us."

"What's this?" Madoc says, interested in the conversation for the first time.

"Impossible," says Randalin. "How would you have heard such a thing?"

"Balekin has been meeting with her representatives," I say.

Randalin snorts. "And I suppose you have that from the prince's own lips?"

If I bit my tongue any harder, I'd bite clean through it. "I have it from more than one source. If their alliance was with Eldred, then it's over."

"The sea Folk have cold hearts," Mikkel says, which sounds at first as though he's agreeing with me, but the approving tone of his voice undermines it.

"Why doesn't Baphen consult his star charts?" Randalin says placatingly.

“If he finds a threat prophesied there, we shall discuss further.”

“I am telling you—” I insist, frustrated.

That is the moment that Fala jumps up on the table and begins to dance—interpretively, I think. Madoc grunts out a laugh. A bird alights on Nihuar’s shoulder, and they begin gossiping back and forth in low whispers and trills.

It is clear that none of them wants to believe me. How could I know something they do not, after all? I am too young, too green, too mortal. “Nicasia—” I begin again.

Madoc smiles. “Your little friend from school.”

I wish I could tell Madoc that the only reason he still sits on the Council is because of me. Despite his running Dain through with his own hand, he is still the Grand General. I could say that I want to keep him busy, that he’s a weapon better deployed by us than against us, that it’s easier for my spies to watch him when I know where he is, but a part of me knows he is still Grand General because I couldn’t bring myself to strip so much authority from my dad.

“There is still the matter of Grimsen,” says Mikkel, moving on as though I have not spoken. “The High King has welcomed the Alderking’s smith, maker of the Blood Crown. Now he dwells among us but does not yet labor for us.”

“We must make him welcome,” says Nihuar in a rare moment of sympathy between the Unseelie and Seelie factions. “The Master of Revels has made plans for the Hunter’s Moon. Perhaps he can add an entertainment for Grimsen’s benefit.”

“Depends on what Grimsen’s into, I guess,” I say, giving up on convincing them that Orlagh is going to move against us. I am on my own.

“Rooting in the dirt, mayhap,” Fala says. “Looking for trifles.”

“Truffles,” Randalin corrects automatically.

“Oh no,” says Fala, wrinkling his nose. “Not those.”

“I will endeavor to discover his preferred amusements.” Randalin makes a small note on a piece of paper. “I have also been told that a representative from the Court of Termites will be attending the Hunter’s Moon revel.”

I try not to let my surprise show. The Court of Termites, led by Lord Roiben, was helpful in getting Cardan onto the throne. And for their efforts I promised that when Lord Roiben asked me for a favor, I’d do it. But I have no idea what he might want, and now isn’t a good time for another complication.

Randalin clears his throat and turns, giving me a pointed look. “Convey our regrets to the High King that we were unable to advise him directly, and let him know we stand ready to come to his aid. If you fail to impress this upon him, we will find other means of doing so.”

I make a short bow and no reply to what is clearly a threat.

As I leave, Madoc falls into step alongside me.

“I understand you’ve spoken with your sister,” he says, thick eyebrows lowered in at least a mimicry of concern.

I shrug, reminding myself that he didn’t speak a word on my behalf today.

He gives me an impatient look. “Don’t tell me how busy you are with that boy king, though I imagine he takes some looking after.”

Somehow, in just a few words, he has turned me into a sullen daughter and himself into her long-suffering father.

I sigh, defeated. “I’ve spoken with Taryn.”

“Good,” he says. “You’re too much alone.”

“Don’t pretend at solicitude,” I say. “It insults us both.”

“You don’t believe that I could care about you, even after you betrayed me?” He watches me with his cat eyes. “I’m still your father.”

“You’re my father’s murderer,” I blurt out.

“I can be both,” Madoc says, smiling, showing those teeth.

I tried to rattle him, but I succeeded only in rattling myself. Despite the passage of months, the memory of his final aborted lunge once he realized he was poisoned is fresh in my mind. I remember his looking as though he would have liked to cleave me in half. “Which is why neither of us should pretend you’re not furious with me.”

“Oh, I’m angry, daughter, but I am also curious.” He makes a dismissive gesture toward the Palace of Elfhame. “Is this really what you wanted? *Him?*”

As with Taryn, I choke on the explanation I cannot give.

When I do not speak, he comes to his own conclusions. “As I thought. I didn’t appreciate you properly. I dismissed your desire for knighthood. I dismissed your capacity for strategy, for strength—and for cruelty. That was my mistake, and one I will not make again.”

I am not sure if that’s a threat or an apology.

“Cardan is the High King now, and so long as he wears the Blood Crown, I am sworn to serve him,” he says. “But no oath binds you. If you regret your move, make another. There are games yet to play.”

“I already won,” I remind him.

He smiles. “We will speak again.”

As he walks off I can’t help thinking that maybe I was better off when he was ignoring me.

CHAPTER 8

I meet the Bomb in High King Eldred's old rooms. This time I am resolved to go over every inch of the chambers before Cardan is moved into them—and I am determined he should stay here, in the most secure part of the palace, whatever his preferences might be.

When I arrive, the Bomb is lighting the last of the fat candles above a fireplace, the runnels of wax so established that they make a kind of sculpture. It is strange to be in here now, without Nicasia to buttonhole or anything else to distract me from looking around. The walls shimmer with mica, and the ceiling is all branches and green vines. In the antechamber, the shell of an enormous snail glows, a lamp the size of a small table.

The Bomb gives me a quick grin. Her white hair is pulled back into braids knotted with a few shimmering silver beads.

Someone you trust has already betrayed you.

I try to put Nicasia's words out of my head. After all, that could mean anything. It's typical faerie bullshit, ominous but applicable so broadly that it could be the clue to a trap about to be sprung on me or a reference to something that happened when we were all taking lessons together. Maybe she is warning me that a spy is in my confidence or maybe she's alluding to Taryn's having it off with Locke.

And yet I cannot stop thinking about it.

"So the assassin got away through here?" the Bomb says. "The Ghost says you chased after them."

I shake my head. "There was no assassin. It was a romantic

misunderstanding.”

Her eyebrows go up.

“The High King is very bad at romance,” I say.

“I guess so,” she says. “So you want to toss the sitting room, and I’ll take the bedroom?”

“Sure,” I agree, heading toward it.

The secret passageway is beside a fireplace carved like the grinning mouth of a goblin. The bookshelf is still shifted to one side, revealing spiraling steps up into the walls. I close it.

“You really think you can get Cardan to move in here?” the Bomb calls from the other room. “It’s such a waste to have all this glorious space go unused.”

I lean down to start pulling books off the shelves, opening them and shaking them a bit to see if there’s anything inside.

A few yellowing and disintegrating pieces of paper fall out, along with a feather and a carved-bone letter opener. Someone hollowed one of the books out, but nothing rests inside the compartment. Still another tome has been eaten away by insects. I throw that one out.

“The last room Cardan occupied caught fire,” I call back to the Bomb. “Let me rephrase. It caught fire because *he lit it on fire*.”

She laughs. “It would take him days to burn all this.”

I look back at the books and am not so sure. They are dry enough to burst into flames just by my looking at them too long. With a sigh, I stack them and move on to the cushions, to pulling back the rugs. Underneath, I find only dust.

I dump out all the drawers onto the massive table-size desk: the metal nibs of quill pens, stones carved with faces, three signet rings, a long tooth of a creature I cannot identify, and three vials with the liquid inside dried black and solid.

In another drawer, I find jewels. A collar of black jet, a beaded bracelet with a clasp, heavy golden rings.

In the last I find quartz crystals, cut into smooth, polished globes and spears. When I lift one to the light, something moves inside it.

“Bomb?” I call, my voice a little high.

She comes into the room, carrying a jeweled coat so heavily encrusted that I am surprised anyone was willing to stand in it. “What’s wrong?”

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?” I hold up a crystal ball.

She peers into it. “Look, there’s Dain.”

I take it back and look inside. A young Prince Dain sits on the back of a horse, holding a bow in one hand and apples in the other. Elowyn sits on a

pony to one side of him, and Rhyia to the other. He throws three apples in the air, and all of them draw their bows and shoot.

"Did that happen?" I ask.

"Probably," she says. "Someone must have enchanted these orbs for Eldred."

I think of Grimsen's legendary swords, of the golden acorn that disgorged Liriope's last words, of Mother Marrow's cloth that could turn even the sharpest blade, and all the mad magic that High Kings are given. These were common enough to be stuffed away into a drawer.

I pull out each one to see what's inside. I see Balekin as a newborn child, the thorns already growing out of his skin. He squalls in the arms of a mortal midwife, her gaze glazed with glamour.

"Look into this one," the Bomb says with a strange expression.

It's Cardan as a very small child. He is dressed in a shirt that's too large for him. It hangs down like a gown. He is barefoot, his feet and shirt streaked with mud, but he wears dangling hoops in his ears, as though an adult gave him their earrings. A horned faerie woman stands nearby, and when he runs to her, she grabs his wrists before he can put his dirty hands on her skirts.

She says something stern and shoves him away. When he falls, she barely notices, too busy being drawn into conversation with other courtiers. I expect Cardan to cry, but he doesn't. Instead, he stomps off to where a boy a little bit older than him is climbing a tree. The boy says something, and Cardan runs at him. Cardan's small, grubby hand forms a fist, and a moment later, the older boy is on the ground. At the sound of the scuffle, the faerie woman turns and laughs, clearly delighted by his escapade.

When Cardan looks back at her, he's smiling too.

I shove the crystal back into the drawer. Who would cherish this? It's horrible.

And yet, it's not *dangerous*. There's no reason to do anything with it but leave it where it was. The Bomb and I continue through the room together. Once we're satisfied it's safe, we head through a door carved with an owl, back into the king's bedchamber.

A massive half-tester bed rests in the center, curtained in green, with the symbol of the Greenbriar line stitched in gleaming gold. Thick spider-silk blankets are smoothed out over a mattress that smells as though it has been stuffed with flowers.

"Come on," says the Bomb, flopping down on the bed and rolling over so that she is looking up at the ceiling. "Let's make sure it's safe for our new High King, just in case."

I suck in a surprised breath, but follow. My weight on the mattress makes

it dip, and the heady scent of roses overwhelms my senses.

Spreading out on the King of Elfhame's coverlets, breathing in the air that perfumed his nights, has an almost hypnotic quality. The Bomb pillows her head in her arms as though it's no big thing, but I remember High King Eldred's hand on my head and the slight jolt of nerves and pride I felt each time he acknowledged me. Lying on his bed feels like wiping my dirty peasant feet on the throne.

And yet, how could I not?

"Our king is a lucky duck," the Bomb says. "I'd like a bed like this, big enough to have a guest or two."

"Oh yeah?" I ask, teasing her as I would have once teased my sisters. "Anyone in particular?"

She looks away, embarrassed, which makes me pay attention. I push myself up on one elbow. "Wait! Is it someone I know?"

For a moment, she doesn't answer, which is long enough.

"It is! The Ghost?"

"Jude!" she says. "No."

I frown at her. "The Roach?"

The Bomb sits up, long fingers pulling the coverlet to her. Since she cannot lie, she only sighs. "You don't understand."

The Bomb is beautiful, delicate features and warm brown skin, wild white hair and luminous eyes. I think of her as possessing some combination of charm and skill that means she could have anyone she wanted.

The Roach's black tongue and his twisted nose and the tuft of fur-like hair at the top of his scalp add up to his being impressive and terrifying, but even according to the aesthetics of Faerieland, even in a place where inhuman beauty is celebrated along with almost opulent ugliness, I am not sure even he would guess that the Bomb longs for him.

I would never have guessed it.

I don't know how to say that to her without sounding as though I am insulting him, however.

"I guess I don't," I concede.

She draws a pillow onto her lap. "My people died in a brutal, internecine Court war a century ago, leaving me on my own. I went into the human world and became a small-time crook. I wasn't particularly good at it. Mostly I was just using glamour to hide my mistakes. That's when the Roach spotted me. He pointed out that while I might not be much of a thief, I was a dab hand at concocting potions and bombs. We went around together for decades. He was so affable, so dapper and charming, that he'd con people right to their faces, no magic required."

I smile at the thought of him in a derby hat and a vest with a pocket watch, amused by the world and everything in it.

“Then he had this idea we were going to steal from the Court of Bone in the West. The con went wrong. The Court carved us up and filled us full of curses and geases. Changed us. Forced us to serve them.” She snaps her fingers, and sparks fly. “Fun, right?”

“I bet it wasn’t,” I say.

She flops back and keeps talking. “The Roach—Van, I can’t call him the Roach while I’m talking like this. Van’s the one who got me through being there. He told me stories, tales of Queen Mab’s imprisoning a frost giant, of binding all the great monsters of yore, and winning the High Crown. Stories of the impossible. Without Van, I don’t know if I could have survived.

“Then we screwed up a job, and Dain got hold of us. He had a scheme for us to betray the Court of Bone and join him. So we did. The Ghost was already by his side, and the three of us made a formidable team. Me with explosives. The Roach stealing anything or anyone. And the Ghost, a sharpshooter with a light step. And here we are, somehow, safe in the Court of Elfhame, working for the High King himself. Look at me, sprawled across his royal bed, even. But here there’s no reason for Van to take my hand or sing to me when I am hurting. There is no reason for him to bother with me at all.”

She lapses into silence. We both stare up at the ceiling.

“You should tell him,” I say. Which is not bad advice, I think. Not advice I would take myself, but that doesn’t necessarily make it bad.

“Perhaps.” The Bomb pushes herself up off the bed. “No tricks or traps. You think it’s safe to let our king in here?”

I think of the boy in the crystal, of his proud smile and his balled fist. I think of the horned faerie woman, who must have been his mother, shoving him away from her. I think of his father, the High King, who didn’t bother to intervene, didn’t even bother to make sure he was clothed or his face wiped. I think of how Cardan avoided these rooms.

I sigh. “I wish I could think of a place he’d be safer.”

At midnight, I am expected to attend a banquet. I sit several seats from the throne and pick at a course of crisped eels. A trio of pixies sings a cappella for us as courtiers try to impress one another with their wit. Overhead, chandeliers drip wax in long strands.

High King Cardan smiles down the table indulgently and yawns like a cat. His hair is messy, as though he did no more than finger-comb it since rising from my bed. Our eyes meet, and I am the one who looks away, my face hot.

Kiss me until I am sick of it.

Wine is brought in colored carafes. They glow aquamarine and sapphire, citrine and ruby, amethyst and topaz. Another course comes, with sugared violets and frozen dew.

Then come domes of glass, under which little silvery fish sit in a cloud of pale blue smoke.

"From the Undersea," says one of the cooks, dressed for the occasion. She bows.

I look across the table at Randalin, Minister of Keys, but he is pointedly ignoring me.

All around me, the domes rise, and the smoke, redolent of peppercorns and herbs, fills the room.

I see that Locke has seated himself beside Cardan, drawing the girl whose seat it was onto his lap. She kicks up her hooved feet and throws back her horned head in laughter.

"Ah," says Cardan, lifting up a gold ring from his plate. "I see my fish has something in its belly."

"And mine," says a courtier on his other side, picking out a single shiny pearl as large as a thumbnail. She laughs with delight. "A gift from the sea."

Each silvery fish contains a treasure. The cooks are summoned, but they give stammering disavowals, swearing the fish were fresh-caught and fed nothing but herbs by the kitchen Folk. I frown at my plate, at the beads of sea glass I find beneath my fish's gills.

When I look up, Locke holds a single gold coin, perhaps part of a lost mortal ship's hoard.

"I see you staring at him," Nicasia says, sitting down beside me. Tonight she wears a gown of gold lacework. Her dark tourmaline hair is pulled up with two golden combs the shape of a shark jaw, complete with golden teeth.

"Perhaps I am looking only at the trinkets and gold with which your mother thinks she can buy this Court's favor," I say.

She picks up one of the violets from my plate and places it delicately on her tongue.

"I lost Cardan's love for Locke's easy words and easier kisses, sugared like these flowers," she says. "Your sister lost *your* love to get Locke's, didn't she? But we all know what you lost."

"Locke?" I laugh. "Good riddance."

Her brows knit together. "Surely it's not the High King himself you were

gazing at."

"Surely not," I echo, but I don't meet her eyes.

"Do you know why you didn't tell anyone my secret?" she asks. "Perhaps you tell yourself that you enjoy having something over my head. But in truth, I think it's that you knew no one would ever believe you. I belong in this world. You don't. And you know it."

"You don't even belong on *land*, sea princess," I remind her. And yet, I cannot help recalling how the Living Council doubted me. I cannot help how her words crawl under my skin.

Someone you trust has already betrayed you.

"This will never be your world, *mortal*," she says.

"This *is* mine," I say, anger making me reckless. "My land and my king. And I will protect them both. Say the same, go on."

"He cannot love you," she says to me, her voice suddenly brittle.

She obviously doesn't like the idea of my claiming Cardan, obviously is still infatuated with him, and just as obviously has no idea what to do about it.

"What do you want?" I ask her. "I was just sitting here, minding my own business, eating my dinner. You're the one who came up to me. You're the one accusing me of… I'm not even sure what."

"Tell me what you have over him," Nicasia says. "How did you trick him into putting you at his right hand, you whom he despised and reviled? How is it that you have his ear?"

"I will tell you, if you tell me something in return." I turn toward her, giving her my full attention. I have been puzzling over the secret passageway in the palace, over the woman in the crystal.

"I've told you all that I am willing to—" Nicasia begins.

"Not that. Cardan's mother," I say, cutting her off. "Who was she? Where is she now?"

She tries to turn her surprise into mockery. "If you're such good friends, why don't you ask him?"

"I never said we were friends."

A servant with a mouth full of sharp teeth and butterfly wings on his back brings the next course. The heart of a deer, cooked rare and stuffed with toasted hazelnuts. Nicasia picks up the meat and tears into it, blood running over her fingers.

She runs her tongue over red teeth. "She wasn't anyone, just some girl from the lower Courts. Eldred never made her a consort, even after she'd borne him a child."

I blink in obvious surprise.

She looks insufferably pleased, as though my not knowing has proved

once and for all how unsuitable I am. “Now it’s your turn.”

“You want to know what I did to make him raise me up?” I ask, leaning toward her, close enough that she can feel the warmth of my breath. “I kissed him on the mouth, and then I threatened to kiss him some more if he didn’t do exactly what I wanted.”

“Liar,” she hisses.

“If you’re such good friends,” I say, repeating her own words back to her with malicious satisfaction, “why don’t you ask him?”

Her gaze goes to Cardan, his mouth stained red with heart’s blood, crown at his brow. They appear two of a kind, a matched set of monsters. He doesn’t look over, busy listening to the lutist who has composed, on the spot, a rollicking ode to his rule.

My king, I think to myself. *But only for a year and a day, and five months are already gone.*

CHAPTER 9

Tatterfell is waiting for me when I get back to my rooms, her beetle eyes disapproving as she picks up the High King's trousers from my couch.

"So this is how you've been living," the little imp grumbles. "A worm in a butterfly's cocoon."

Something about being scolded is comfortingly familiar, but that doesn't mean I like it. I turn away so she can't see my embarrassment at how untidy I've let things get. Not to mention what it looks like I've been doing, and with whom.

Sworn into Madoc's service until she worked off some old debt of honor, Tatterfell could not have come here without his knowledge. She may have taken care of me since I was a child—brushed my hair and mended my dresses and strung rowan berries to keep me from being enchanted—but it is Madoc who has her loyalty. It's not that I don't think she was fond of me, in her way, but I've never mistaken that for love.

I sigh. The castle servants would have cleaned my rooms if I let them, but then they'd notice my odd hours and be able to rifle through my papers, not to mention my poisons. No, better to bar the door and sleep in filth.

My sister's voice comes from my bedroom. "You're back early." She sticks her head out, holding up a few garments.

Someone you trust has already betrayed you.

"How did you get in?" I ask. My key turned, met resistance. The tumblers moved. I have been taught the humble art of lock picking, and though I am no prodigy, I can at least tell when a door is locked in the first place.

“Oh,” Taryn says, and laughs. “I posed as you and got a copy of your key.”

I want to kick a wall. Surely everyone knows I have a twin sister. Surely everyone knows mortals can lie. Ought someone not have at least asked a question she might find tricky to answer before handing over access to palace rooms? To be fair, though, I have myself lied again and again and gotten away with it. I can hardly begrudge Taryn for doing the same.

It’s my bad luck that tonight is when she chooses to barge in, with Cardan’s clothing scattered over my rug and a heap of his bloody bandages still on a low table.

“I persuaded Madoc to gift the remainder of Tatterfell’s debt to you,” Taryn announces. “And I’ve brought you all your coats and dresses and jewels.”

I look into the imp’s inkdrop eyes. “You mean Madoc has her spying for him.”

Tatterfell’s lip curls, and I am reminded how sharply she pinches. “Aren’t you a sly and suspicious girl? You ought to be ashamed, saying such a thing.”

“I am grateful for the times you were kind,” I say. “If Madoc has given your debt to me, consider it paid long ago.”

Tatterfell frowns unhappily. “Madoc spared my lover’s life when he could have taken it by right. I pledged him a hundred years of my service, and that time is nearly up. Do not dishonor my vow by thinking it can be dismissed with a wave of *your* hand.”

I am stung by her words. “Are you sorry he sent you?”

“Not yet,” she says, and goes back to work.

I head toward my bedroom, picking up Cardan’s bloody rags before Tatterfell can. As I pass the hearth, I toss them into the flames. The fire flares up.

“So,” I ask my sister, “what did you bring me?”

She points to my bed, where she has spread my old things on my newly rumpled sheets. It’s odd to see the clothes and jewels I haven’t had in months, the things Madoc bought for me, the things Oriana approved. Tunics, gowns, fighting gear, doublets. Taryn even brought the homespun I used to sneak around Hollow Hall and the clothes we wore when we snuck to the mortal world.

When I look at it all, I see a person who is both me and not. A kid who went to classes and didn’t think the stuff she was learning would be all that important. A girl who wanted to impress the only dad she knew, who wanted a place in the Court, who still believed in honor.

I am not sure I fit in these clothes anymore.

Still, I hang them in my closet, beside my two black doublets and a single

pair of high boots.

I open a box of my jewels. Earrings given to me for birthdays, a golden cuff, three rings—one with a ruby that Madoc gave me on a blood moon revel, one with his crest that I don't even remember receiving, and a thin gold one that was a present from Oriana. Necklaces of carved moonstone, chunks of quartz, carved bone. I slide the ruby ring onto my left hand.

"And I brought some sketches," she says, taking out a pad of paper and sitting cross-legged on my bed. Neither of us are great artists, but her drawings of clothing are easy to understand. "I want to take them to my tailor."

She's imagined me in a lot of black jackets with high collars, the skirts slashed up the sides for easy movement. The shoulders look as though they're armored, and, in a few cases, she has drawn what appears to be a single shiny sleeve of metal.

"They can measure me," she says. "You won't even have to go to the fittings."

I give her a long look. Taryn doesn't like conflict. Her manner of dealing with all the terror and confusion in our lives has been to become immensely adaptable, like one of those lizards that changes color to match its surroundings. She's the person who knows what to wear and how to behave, because she studies people carefully and mimics them.

She's good at picking out clothes to send a certain message—even if the message of her drawings appears to be "stay away from me or I will chop off your head"—and it's not like I don't think she wants to help me, but the effort she's put into this, especially as her own marriage is imminent, seems extraordinary.

"Okay," I say. "What do you want?"

"What do you mean?" she asks, all innocence.

"You want us to be friends again," I say, sliding into more modern diction with her. "I appreciate that. You want me to come to your wedding, which is great, because I want to be there. But this—this is too much."

"I can be nice," she says, but does not meet my eyes.

I wait. For a long moment, neither of us speaks. I know she saw Cardan's clothes tossed on the floor. Her not immediately asking about that should have been my first clue that she wanted something.

"Fine." She sighs. "It's not a big deal, but there is a thing I want to talk to you about."

"No kidding," I say, but I can't help smiling.

She shoots me a look of vast annoyance. "I don't want Locke to be Master of Revels."

“You and me both.”

“But you could do something about it!” Taryn winds her hands in her skirts. “Locke craves dramatic experiences. And as Master of Revels, he can create these—I don’t even know what to call them—*stories*. He doesn’t so much think of a party as food and drinks and music, but rather a dynamic that might create conflict.”

“Okay…” I say, trying to imagine what that means for politics. Nothing good.

“He wants to see how I’ll react to the things he does,” she says.

That’s true. He wanted to know, for instance, if Taryn loved him enough to let him court me while she stood by, silent and suffering. I think he’d have been interested in finding out the same about me, but I turned out to be very prickly.

She goes on. “And Cardan. And the Circles of the Court. He’s already been talking to the Larks and the Grackles, finding their weaknesses, figuring out which squabbles he can inflame and how.”

“Locke might do the Larks some good,” I say. “Give them a ballad to write.” As for the Grackles, if he can compete with their debauches, I guess he ought to have at it, although I am clever enough not to say that out loud.

“The way he talks, for a moment, it all seems like it’s fun, even if it’s a terrible idea,” Taryn says. “His being Master of Revels is going to be awful. He will take lovers and be away from me. And I will hate it. Jude, please. Do something. I know you want to say you told me so, but I don’t care.”

I have bigger problems, I want to tell her.

“Madoc would almost certainly say you don’t have to marry him. Vivi’d say that, too, I bet. In fact, I bet they have.”

“But you know me too well to bother.” She shakes her head. “When I’m with him, I feel like the hero of a story. Of *my* story. It’s when he’s not there that things don’t feel right.”

I don’t know what to say to that. I could point out that Taryn seems to be the one making up the story, casting Locke in the role of the protagonist and herself as the romantic interest who disappears when she’s not on the page.

But I do remember being with Locke, feeling special and chosen and pretty. Now, thinking about it, I just feel dumb.

I guess I *could* order Cardan to strip the title from Locke, but Cardan would resent my using my power for something so petty and personal. It would make me seem weak. And Locke would figure out that the stripping of his title was my fault, since I haven’t made my dislike a secret. He’d know that I had more power over Cardan than quite made sense.

And everything Taryn is complaining about would still happen. Locke

doesn’t need to be the High King’s Master of Revels to get into this kind of trouble; the title just allows him to manage it on a grander scale.

“I’ll talk to Cardan about it,” I lie.

Her gaze goes to where his clothes were scattered across my floor, and she smiles.

CHAPTER 10

As the Hunter’s Moon approaches, the level of debauchery in the palace increases. The tenor of the parties change—they become more frenetic, more wild. No longer is Cardan’s presence necessary for such license. Now that rumors paint him as someone who would shoot a lover for sport, his legend grows from there.

Recollections of his younger days—of the way he rode a horse into our lessons, the fights he had, the cruelties he perpetrated—are picked over. The more horrible the story, the more it is cherished. Faeries may not be able to lie, but stories grow here as they do anywhere, fed on ambition and envy and desire.

In the afternoons, I step over sleeping bodies in the halls. Not all of them are courtiers. Servants and guards seem to have fallen prey to the same wild energy and can be found abandoning their duties to pleasure. Naked Folk run across the gardens of Elfhame, and troughs once used to water horses now run with wine.

I meet with Vulciber, seeking more information about the Undersea, but he has none. Despite knowing that Nicasia was trying to bait me, I go over the list of people who may have betrayed me. I fret over who and to what end, over the arrival of Lord Roiben’s ambassador, over how to extend my year-and-a-day lease on the throne. I study my moldering papers and drink my poisons and plan a thousand parries to blows that may never come.

Cardan has moved to Eldred’s old chambers, and the rooms with the burned floor are barred from the inside. If it makes him uncomfortable to

sleep where his father slept, he gives no sign. When I arrive, he is lounging nonchalantly as servants remove tapestries and divans to make room for a new bed carved to his specifications.

He is not alone. A small circle of courtiers is with him—a few I don't know, plus Locke, Nicasia, and my sister, currently pink with wine and laughing on the rug before the fire.

"Go," he says to them when he sees me at the threshold.

"But, Your Majesty," begins a girl. She's all cream and gold, in a light blue gown. Long pale antennae rise from the outer edges of her eyebrows. "Surely such dull news as your seneschal brings will require the antidote of our cheer."

I've thought carefully about commanding Cardan. Too many orders and he'd chafe under them, too few and he'd duck beneath them easily. But I am glad to have made sure he'd never deny me admittance. I am especially glad that he can never countermand me.

"I am sure I will call you back swiftly enough," Cardan says, and the courtiers troop out merrily. One of them carries a mug, obviously stolen from the mortal world and filled to the brim with wine. *I RULE*, it reads. Locke shoots me a curious glance. My sister grabs hold of my hand as she goes, squeezing it hopefully.

I go to a chair and sit down without waiting for an invitation. I want to remind Cardan that over me, he has no authority.

"The Hunter's Moon revel is tomorrow night," I say.

He sprawls in a chair opposite mine, watching me with his black eyes as though I am the one to be wary of. "If you wish to know details, you ought to have kept Locke behind. I know little. It is to be another one of my performances. I shall caper while you scheme."

"Orlagh of the Undersea is watching you—"

"Everyone's watching me," Cardan says, fingers fiddling restlessly with his signet ring, turning it round and round again.

"You don't seem to mind," I say. "You said yourself that you don't hate being king. Maybe you're even enjoying it."

He gives me a suspicious look.

I try to give him a genuine smile in return. I hope I can be convincing. I need to be convincing. "We can both have what we want. You can rule for a lot longer than a year. All you have to do is extend your vow. Let me command you for a decade, for a score of years, and together—"

"I think not," he says, cutting me off. "After all, you know how dangerous it would be to have Oak sit in my place. He is only a year older than he was. He's not ready. And yet, in only a few months, you will have to order me to

abdicate in favor of him or make an arrangement that will require us to trust each other—rather than my trusting you without hope of being trusted in return."

I am furious with myself for thinking he might agree to keeping things the way they are.

He gives me his sweetest smile. "Perhaps then you could be my seneschal in earnest."

I grit my teeth. Once, a position as grand as seneschal would have been beyond my wildest dreams. Now it seems a humiliation. Power is infectious. Power is greedy.

"Have a care," I tell him. "I can make the months that remain go slowly indeed."

His smile doesn't falter. "Any other commands?" he asks. I ought to tell him more about Orlagh, but the thought of his crowing over her offer is more than I can bear. I cannot let that marriage happen, and right now I don't want to be teased about it.

"Don't drink yourself to death tomorrow," I say. "And watch out for my sister."

"Taryn seemed well enough tonight," he says. "Roses in her cheeks and merriment on her lips."

"Let's be sure she stays that way," I say.

His brows rise. "Would you like me to seduce her away from Locke? I could certainly try. I promise nothing in the way of results, but you might find amusement in the attempt."

"No, no, absolutely not, do not do that," I say, and do not examine the hot spike of panic his words induce. "I just mean try to keep Locke from being his worst self when she's around, that's all."

He narrows his eyes. "Shouldn't you encourage just the opposite?"

Perhaps it *would* be better for Taryn to discover unhappiness with Locke as soon as possible. But she's my sister, and I never want to be the cause of her pain. I shake my head.

He makes a vague gesture in the air. "As you wish. Your sister will be wrapped in satin and sackcloth, as protected from herself as I can make her."

I stand. "The Council wants Locke to arrange some amusement to please Grimsen. If it's nice, perhaps the smith will make you a cup that never runs out of wine."

Cardan gives me a look up through his lashes that I find hard to interpret and then rises, too. He takes my hand. "Nothing is sweeter," he says, kissing the back of it, "but that which is scarce."

My skin flushes, hot and uncomfortable.

When I go out, his little circle is in the hall, waiting to be allowed back into his rooms. My sister looks a bit queasy, but when she sees me, she pastes on a wide, fake smile. One of the boys has put a limerick to music, playing it again and again, faster and faster. Their laughter floods the hallway, sounding like the cawing of crows.

Heading through the palace, I pass a chamber where a few courtiers have gathered. There, toasting an eel in the flames of a massive fireplace, sitting on a rug, is the old High King Eldred's Court Poet and Seneschal, Val Moren.

Faerie artists and musicians sit around him. Since the death of most of the royal family, he's found himself at the center of one of the Court factions, the Circle of Larks. Brambles are coiled in his hair, and he sings softly to himself. He's mortal, like me. He's also probably mad.

"Come drink with us," one of the Larks says, but I demur.

"Pretty, petty Jude." The flames dance in Val Moren's eyes when he looks my way. He begins picking off burnt skin and eating the soft white flesh of the eel. Between bites, he speaks. "Why haven't you come to me for advice yet?"

It's said that he was High King Eldred's lover, once. He's been in the Court since long before the time my sisters and I came here. Despite that, he never made common cause of our mortality. He never tried to help us, never tried to reach out to us to make us feel less alone. "Do you have some?"

He gazes at me and pops one of the eyes of the eel into his mouth. It sits, glistening, on his tongue. Then he swallows. "Maybe. But it matters little."

I am so tired of riddles. "Let me guess. Because when I ask you for advice, you're not going to give it to me?"

He laughs, a dry, hollow sound. I wonder how old he is. Under the brambles, he looks like a young man, but mortals won't grow old so long as they don't leave Elfhame. Although I cannot see age in lines in his face, I can see it in his eyes. "Oh, I will give you the finest advice anyone's ever given you. But you will not heed it."

"Then what good are you?" I demand, about to turn away. I don't have time for a few lines of useless doggerel for me to interpret.

"I'm an excellent juggler," he says, wiping his hands on his pants, leaving stains behind. He reaches into his pocket, coming up with a stone, three acorns, a piece of crystal, and what appears to be a wishbone. "Juggling, you

see, is just tossing two things in the air at the same time."

He begins to toss the acorns back and forth, then adds the wishbone. A few of the Larks nudge one another, whispering delightedly. "No matter how many things you add, you've got only two hands, so you can only toss two things. You've just got to throw faster and faster, higher and higher." He adds the stone and the crystal, the things flying between his hands fast enough that it's hard to see what he's tossing. I suck in a breath.

Then everything falls, crashing to the stone floor. The crystal shatters. One of the acorns rolls close to the fire.

"My advice," says Val Moren, "is that you learn to juggle better than I did, seneschal."

For a long moment, I am so angry that I can't move. I feel incandescent with it, betrayed by the one person who ought to understand how hard it is to be what we are, here.

Before I do something I will regret, I turn on my heels and walk away.

"I foretold you wouldn't take my advice," he calls after me.

CHAPTER 11

The evening of the Hunter's Moon, the whole Court moves to the Milkwood, where the trees are shrouded in masses of silk coverings that look, to my mortal eyes, like nothing so much as the egg sacks of moths, or perhaps the wrapped-up suppers of spiders.

Locke has had a structure of flat stones built up the way a wall might be, into the rough shape of a throne. A massive slab of rock serves for a back, with a wide stone for a seat. It towers over the grove. Cardan sits on it, crown gleaming at his brow. The nearby bonfire burns sage and yarrow. For a distorted moment, he seems larger than himself, moved into myth, the true High King of Faerie and no one's puppet.

Awe slows my step, panic following at my heels.

A king is a living symbol, a beating heart, a star upon which Elfhame's future is written. Surely you have noticed that since his reign began, the isles are different. Storms come in faster. Colors are a bit more vivid, smells are sharper. When he becomes drunk, his subjects become tipsy without knowing why. When his blood falls, things grow.

I just hope he doesn't see any of this on my face. When I am in front of him, I bow my head, grateful for an excuse not to meet his eyes.

"My king," I say.

Cardan rises from the throne, unclasping a cape made entirely of gleaming black feathers. A new ring glimmers on his pinkie finger, red stone catching the flames of the bonfire. A very familiar ring. *My* ring.

I recall that he took my hand in his rooms.

I grind my teeth, stealing a glance at my own bare hand. He stole my ring. He stole it and I didn't notice. The Roach taught him how to do that.

I wonder if Nicasia would count that as a betrayal. It sure feels like one.

"Walk with me," he says, taking my hand and guiding me through the crowd. Hobs and grigs, green skin and brown, tattered wings and sculpted bark garments—all the Folk of Elfhame have come out tonight in their finery. We pass a man in a coat stitched with golden leaves and another in a green leather vest with a cap that curls up like a fern. Blankets cover the ground and are piled with trays of grapes the size of fists and ruby-bright cherries.

"What are we doing?" I ask as Cardan steers me to the edge of the woods.

"I find it tedious to have my every conversation remarked on," he says. "I want you to know your sister isn't here tonight. I made sure of it."

"So what does Locke have planned?" I ask, unwilling to be grateful and refusing to compliment him on his sleight of hand. "He's certainly staked his reputation on this evening."

Cardan makes a face. "I don't worry my pretty head about that kind of thing. You're the ones who are supposed to be doing the work. Like the ant in the fable who labors in the dirt while the grasshopper sings the summer away."

"And has nothing left for winter," I say.

"I need for nothing," he says, shaking his head, mock-mournful. "I am the Corn King, after all, to be sacrificed so little Oak can take my place in the spring."

Overhead, orbs have been lit and glow with warm, magical light as they drift through the night air, but his words send a shiver of dread through me.

I look into his eyes. His hand slides to my hip, as though he might pull me closer. For a dizzy, stupid moment, something seems to shimmer in the air between us.

Kiss me until I am sick of it.

He doesn't try to kiss me, of course. He hasn't been shot at, isn't delirious with drink, isn't filled with enough self-loathing.

"You ought not to be here tonight, little ant," he says, letting go of me. "Go back to the palace." Then he is cutting back through the crowd. Courtiers bow as he passes. A few, the most brazen, catch hold of his coat, flirt, try to pull him into the dance.

And he, who once ripped a boy's wing from his back because he wouldn't bow, now allows all this familiarity with a laugh.

What has changed? Is he different because I have forced him to be? Is it because he is away from Balekin? Or is he no different at all and I am only seeing what I want to see?

I still feel the warm pressure of his fingers against my skin. Something is really wrong with me, to want what I hate, to want someone who despises me, even if he wants me, too. My only comfort is that he doesn't know what I feel.

Whatever debauchery Locke has planned, I must stay to find the representative from the Court of Termites. The sooner my favor to their Lord Roiben is dismissed, the sooner I have one less debt hanging over my head. Besides, they can hardly offend me more than they have.

Cardan makes it back to the throne as Nicasia arrives with Grimsen, a moth pin holding his cloak.

Grimsen begins a speech that doubtlessly is flattering and produces something from a pocket. It looks like an earring—a single drop, which Cardan lifts to the light and admires. I guess he has made his first magical object in Elfhame's service.

In the tree to the left of them, I see the hob-faced owl, Snapdragon, blinking down. Although I can't spot them, the Ghost and several more spies are nearby, watching the revel from enough distance that if a move is made, they will be there.

A centaur-like musician with the body of a deer has come forward—one carrying a lyre carved in the shape of a pixie, her wings forming the top curve of the instrument. It is strung with what appears to be thread of many colors. The musician begins to play, the carving to sing.

Nicasia saunters over to where the smith is sitting. She wears a dress of purple that is peacock blue when it catches the light. Her hair is woven into a braid that circles her head, and at her brow is a chain from which dangle dozens upon dozens of beads in sparkling purples and blues and amber.

When Grimsen turns toward her, his expression lightens. I frown.

Jugglers begin tossing a series of objects—from live rats to shiny swords—into the air. Wine and honeyed cakes are passed around.

Finally, I spot Dulcamara from the Court of Termites, her red-as-poppies hair bound up into coils and a two-handed blade strapped across her back, a silver dress blowing around her. I walk over, trying not to seem intimidated.

"Welcome," I say. "To what do we owe the honor of your visit? Has your king found something I could do—"

She cuts me off with a glance toward Cardan. "Lord Roiben wants you to know that even in the low Courts, we hear things."

For a moment, my mind goes through an anxious inventory of all the things Dulcamara might have heard, then I remember that the Folk have been whispering that Cardan shot one of his lovers for his own amusement. The Court of Termites is one of the few Courts to have both Seelie and Unseelie

members; I'm not sure if they'd mind about the hurt courtier or just the possibility of an unstable High King.

"Even without liars, there can still be lies," I say carefully. "Whatever rumors you heard, I can explain what really happened."

"Because I ought to believe you? I think not." She smiles. "We can call in our marker anytime we like, mortal girl. Lord Roiben may send me to you, for instance, to be your personal guard." I wince. By *guard* she obviously means *spy*. "Or perhaps we will borrow your smith, Grimsen. He could make Lord Roiben a blade that cuts clean through vows."

"I haven't forgotten my debt. Indeed, I hoped you would let me repay it now," I say, drawing myself up to my full authority. "But Lord Roiben shouldn't forget—"

She cuts me off with a snarl. "See that you don't forget." With that, she stalks off, leaving me to think of all the smarter things I should have said. I still owe a debt to the Court of Termites, and I still have no way to extend my power over Cardan. I still have no idea who might have betrayed me or what to do about Nicasia.

At least this revel does not seem particularly worse than any other, for all of Locke's braggadocio. I wonder if it might be possible for me to do what Taryn wants and get him ousted as Master of Revels after all, just for being boring.

As though Locke can read my thoughts, he claps his hands together, silencing the crowd. Music stutters to a stop, and with it the dancing and juggling, even the laughter.

"I have another amusement for you," he says. "It is time to crown a monarch tonight. The Queen of Mirth."

One of the lutists plays a merry improvisation. There is scattered laughter from the audience.

A chill goes through me. I have heard of the game, although I have never seen it played. It is simple enough: Steal away a mortal girl, make her drunk on faerie wine and faerie flattery and faerie kisses, then convince her she is being honored with a crown—all the time heaping insults on her oblivious head.

If Locke has brought some mortal girl here to have fun at her expense, he will have me to reckon with. I will lash him to the black rocks of Insweal for the mermaids to devour.

While I am still thinking that, Locke says, "But surely only a king can crown a queen."

Cardan stands up from the throne, stepping down the stones to be beside Locke. His long, feathered cape slithers after him.

“So where is she?” the High King asks, brows raised. He doesn’t seem amused, and I am hopeful he will end this before it begins. What possible satisfaction could he find in the game?

“Haven’t you guessed? There is only one mortal among our company,” Locke says. “Why, our Queen of Mirth is none other than Jude Duarte.”

For a moment, my mind goes entirely blank. I cannot think. Then I see Locke’s grin and the grinning faces of the Folk of the Court, and all my feelings curdle into dread.

“Let’s have a cheer for her,” says Locke.

They cry out in their inhuman voices, and I have to choke down panic. I look over at Cardan and find something dangerous glittering in his eyes—I will get no sympathy there.

Nicasia is smiling exultantly, and beside her, the smith, Grimsen, is clearly diverted. Dulcamara, at the edge of the woods, watches to see what I will do.

I guess Locke has done something right at last. He promised the High King delights, and I am entirely sure that Cardan is thoroughly delighted.

I could order him to stop whatever happens next. He knows it, too, which means that he supposes I will hate what he’s about to do, but not enough to command him and reveal all.

Of course, there’s a lot I would endure before I did that.

You will regret this. I don’t say the words, but I look at Cardan and think them with such force that it feels as though I am shouting.

Locke gives a signal, and a group of imps comes forward carrying an ugly, tattered dress, along with a circle of branches. Affixed to the makeshift crown are foul little mushrooms, the kind that produce a putrid-smelling dust.

I swear under my breath.

“New raiment for our new queen,” Locke says.

There is some scattered laughter and gasps of surprise. This is a cruel game, meant to be played on mortal girls when they’re glamoured so they don’t know they’re being laughed at. That’s the fun of it, their foolishness. They delight over dresses that appear like finery to them. They exult greedily over crowns seeming to gleam with jewels. They swoon at the promise of true love.

Thanks to Prince Dain’s geas, faerie glamours do not work on me, but even if they did, every member of the Court expects the High King’s human seneschal to be wearing a charm of protection—a strand of rowan berries, a tiny bundle of oak, ash, and thorn twigs. They know I see the truth of what Locke is giving me.

The Court watches me with eager, indrawn breaths. I am sure they have never watched a Queen of Mirth who knew she was being mocked before.

This is a new kind of game.

"Tell us what you think of our lady," Locke asks Cardan loudly, with a strange smile.

The High King's expression stiffens, only to smooth out a moment later when he turns toward the Court. "I have too often been troubled by dreams of Jude," he says, voice carrying. "Her face features prominently in my most frequent nightmare."

The courtiers laugh. Heat floods my face because he's telling them a secret and using that secret to mock me.

When Eldred was High King, his revels were staid, but a new High King isn't just a renewal of the land, but of the Court itself. I can tell he delights them with his caprices and his capacity for cruelty. I was a fool to be tempted into thinking he's any different than he's always been. "Some among us do not find mortals beautiful. In fact, some of you might swear that Jude is unlovely."

For a moment, I wonder if he *wants* me to be furious enough to order him to stop and reveal our bargain to the Court. But no, it's only that with my heart thundering in my head, I can barely think.

"But I believe it is only that her beauty is… unique." Cardan pauses for more laughter from the crowd, greater jeering. "Excruciating. Alarming. *Distressing*."

"Perhaps she needs new raiment to bring out her true allure," Locke says. "Greater finery for one so fine."

The imps move to pull the tattered, threadbare rag gown over my own to the delight of the Folk.

More laughter. My whole body feels hot. Part of me wants to run away, but I am caught by the desire to show them I cannot be cowed.

"Wait," I say, pitching my voice loud enough to carry. The imps hesitate. Cardan's expression is unreadable.

I reach down and catch hold of my hem, then pull the dress I am wearing over my head. It's a simple thing—no corset, no clasps—and it comes off just as simply. I stand in the middle of the party in my underwear, daring them to say something. Daring Cardan to speak.

"*Now* I am ready to put on my new gown," I say. There are a few cheers, as though they don't understand the game is humiliation. Locke, surprisingly, appears delighted.

Cardan steps close to me, his gaze devouring. I am not sure I can bear his cutting me down again. Luckily, he seems at a loss for words.

"I hate you," I whisper before he can speak.

He takes my chin in his fingers, tilting my face to his.

“Say it again,” he says as the imps comb my hair and place the ugly, stinking crown on my head. His voice is low. The words are for me alone.

I pull out of his grip, but not before I see his expression. He looks as he did when he was forced to answer my questions, when he admitted his desire for me. He looks as though he’s confessing.

A flush goes through me, confusing because I am both furious and shamed. I turn my head.

“Queen of Mirth, time for your first dance,” Locke tells me, pushing me toward the crowd.

Clawed fingers close on my arms. Inhuman laughter rings in my ears as the music starts. When the dance begins anew, I am in it. My feet slap down on the dirt in time with the pounding rhythm of the drums, my heart speeds with the trill of a flute. I am spun around, passed hand to hand through the crowd. Pushed and shoved, pinched and bruised.

I try to pull against the compulsion of the music, try to break away from the dance, but I cannot. When I try to drag my feet, hands haul me along until the music catches me up again. Everything becomes a wild blur of sound and flying cloth, of shiny inkdrop eyes and too-sharp teeth.

I am lost to it, out of my own control, as though I were a child again, as though I hadn’t bargained with Dain and poisoned myself and stolen the throne. This is not glamour. I cannot stop myself from dancing, cannot stop my body from moving even as my terror grows. I will not stop. I will dance through the leather of my shoes, dance until my feet are bloody, dance until I collapse.

“Cease playing!” I shout as loudly as I can, panic giving my voice the edge of a scream. “As your Queen of Mirth, as the seneschal of the High King, you will allow me to choose the dance!”

The musicians pause. The footfalls of the dancers slow. It is only perhaps a moment’s reprieve, but I wasn’t sure I could get even that. I am shaking all over with fury and fear and the strain of fighting my own body.

I draw myself up, pretending with the rest of them that I am decked out in finery instead of rags. “Let’s have a reel,” I say, trying to imagine the way my stepmother, Oriana, would have spoken the words. For once, my voice comes out just the way I want, full of cool command. “And I will dance it with my king, who has showered me with so many compliments and gifts tonight.”

The Court watches me with their glistening, wet eyes. These are words they might expect the Queen of Mirth to say, the ones I am sure countless mortals have spoken before under different circumstances.

I hope it unnerves them to know I am lying.

After all, if the insult to me is pointing out that I am mortal, then this is my

riposte: I live here, too, and I know the rules. Perhaps I even know them better than you since you were born into them, but I had to learn. Perhaps I know them better than you because you have greater leeway to break them.

"Will you dance with me?" I ask Cardan, sinking into a curtsy, acid in my voice. "For I find you every bit as beautiful as you find me."

A hiss goes through the crowd. I have scored a point on Cardan, and the Court is not sure how to feel about it. They like unfamiliar things, like surprises, but perhaps they are wondering if they will like this one.

Still, they seem riveted by my little performance.

Cardan's smile is unreadable.

"I'd be delighted," he says as the musicians begin to play again. He sweeps me into his arms.

We danced once before, at the coronation of Prince Dain. Before the murdering began. Before I took Cardan prisoner at knifepoint. I wonder if he is thinking of it when he spins me around the Milkwood.

He might not be particularly practiced with a blade, but as he promised the hag's daughter, he's a skilled dancer. I let him steer me through steps I doubtlessly would have fumbled on my own. My heart is racing, and my skin is slicked with sweat.

Papery moths fly above our heads, circling up as though tragically drawn to the light of the stars.

"Whatever you do to me," I say, too angry to stay quiet, "I can do worse to you."

"Oh," he says, fingers tight on mine. "Do not think I forget that for a moment."

"Then *why*?" I demand.

"You believe I planned your humiliation?" He laughs. "Me? That sounds like work."

"I don't care if you did or not," I tell him, too angry to make sense of my feelings. "I just care that you enjoyed it."

"And why shouldn't I delight to see you squirm? You tricked me," Cardan says. "You played me for a fool, and now I am the King of Fools."

"The *High* King of Fools," I say, a sneer in my voice. Our gazes meet, and there's a shock of mutual understanding that our bodies are pressed too closely. I am conscious of my skin, of the sweat beading on my lip, of the slide of my thighs against each other. I am aware of the warmth of his neck beneath my twined fingers, of the prickly brush of his hair and how I want to sink my hands into it. I inhale the scent of him—moss and oak wood and leather. I stare at his treacherous mouth and imagine it on me.

Everything about this is wrong. Around us, the revel is resuming. Some of

the Court glance our way, because some of the Court always look to the High King, but Locke's game is at an end.

Go back to the palace, Cardan said, and I ignored the warning.

I think of Locke's expression while Cardan spoke, the eagerness in his face. It wasn't me he was watching. I wonder for the first time if my humiliation was incidental, the bait to his hook.

Tell us what you think of our lady.

To my immense relief, at the end of the reel, the musicians pause again, looking to the High King for instructions.

I pull away from him. "I am overcome, Your Majesty. I would like your permission to withdraw."

For a moment, I wonder what I will do if Cardan denies me permission. I have issued many commands, but none about sparing my feelings.

"You are free to depart or stay, as you like," Cardan says magnanimously. "The Queen of Mirth is welcome wheresoever she goes."

I turn away from him and stumble out of the revel to lean against a tree, sucking in breaths of cool sea air. My cheeks are hot, my face is burning.

At the edge of the Milkwood, I watch waves beating against the black rocks. After a moment, I notice shapes on the sand, as though shadows were moving on their own. I blink again. Not shadows. Selkies, rising from the sea. A score, at least. They cast off their sleek sealskins and raise silver blades.

The Undersea has come to the Hunter's Moon revel.

CHAPTER 12

I rush back, tearing the long gown on thorns and briars in my haste. I go immediately to the nearest member of the guard. He looks startled when I run up, out of breath, still clad in the rags of the Queen of Mirth.

"The Undersea," I manage. "Selkies. They're coming. Protect the king."

He doesn't hesitate, doesn't doubt me. He calls together his knights and moves to flank the throne. Cardan looks at their movement in confusion, and then with a brief, bright spark of panic. No doubt he is recalling how Madoc ordered the circling of the guards around the dais at Prince Dain's coronation ceremony, just before Balekin started murdering people.

Before I can explain, out of the Milkwood step the selkies, their sleek bodies bare except for long ropes of seaweed and pearls around their throats. The playing of instruments ceases. Laughter gutters out.

Reaching to my thigh, I take out the long knife holstered there.

"What is this?" Cardan demands, standing.

A female selkie bows and steps to one side. Behind them come the Gentry of the Undersea. Walking on legs I am not sure they possessed an hour before, they sweep through the grove in soaking-wet gowns and doublets and hose, seeming not at all discomfited. They look ferocious even in their finery.

My eyes search the crowd for Nicasia, but neither she nor the smith are there. Locke sits on one of the arms of the throne, looking for all the world as though he takes for granted that if Cardan is High King, then being High King cannot be so special.

"Your Majesty," says a gray-skinned man in a coat that appears to be made

from the skin of a shark. He has a strange voice, one that seems hoarse with disuse. “Orlagh, Queen of the Undersea, sends us with a message for the High King. Grant us permission to speak.”

The half circle of knights around Cardan tightens.

Cardan does not immediately answer. Instead, he sits. “The Undersea is welcome at this Hunter’s Moon revel. Dance. Drink. Never let it be said that we are not generous hosts, even to uninvited guests.”

The man kneels, but his expression is not at all humble. “Your munificence is great. And yet, we may not partake of it until our lady’s message is delivered. You must hear us.”

“Must I? Very well,” the High King says after a moment. He makes an airy gesture. “What has she to say?”

The gray-skinned man beckons a girl in a wet blue dress, her hair up in braids. When she opens her mouth, I see that her teeth are thin, viciously pointed, and oddly translucent. She intones the words in a singsong:

The Sea needs a bridegroom,
The Land needs a bride.
Cleave together lest
You face the rising tide.
Spurn the Sea once,
We will have your blood.
Spurn the Sea twice,
We will have your clay.
Spurn the Sea thrice,
Your crown will away.

The gathered Folk of the land, courtiers and petitioners, servants and Gentry, grow wide-eyed at the words.

“Is that a proposal?” Locke asks. I think he means to speak so that only Cardan hears him, but in the silence, his voice carries.

“A threat, I’m afraid,” Cardan returns. He glares at the girl, at the gray-skinned man, at everyone. “You’ve delivered your message. I have no bit of doggerel to send back—my own fault for having a seneschal who cannot double as my Court Poet—but I will be sure to crumple up some paper and drop it into the water when I do.”

For a moment, everyone stays as they were, exactly in their places.

Cardan claps his hands, startling the sea Folk. “Well?” he shouts. “Dance! Make merry! Isn’t that what you came for?”

His voice rings with authority. He no longer just *looks* like the High King of Elfhame; he *sounds* like the High King.

A shiver of premonition goes through me.

The Undersea courtiers, in their sodden garments and gleaming pearls, watch him with pale, cold eyes. Their faces are unexpressive enough that I cannot tell if his shouting upset them. But when the music begins again, they take one another's webbed hands and sweep away into the revel, to leap and cavort as though this was something they did for pleasure themselves beneath the waves.

My spies have remained hidden through this encounter. Locke melts away from the throne to whirl with two mostly naked selkies. Nicasia remains nowhere to be seen, and when I look for Dulcamara, I cannot spot her, either. Dressed as I am, I cannot bear to speak with anyone in an official capacity. I tear the stinking crown from my head and toss it into the grass.

I think about shimmying out of the tattered gown, but before I can decide to actually do it, Cardan waves me over to the throne.

I do not bow. Tonight, after all, I am a ruler in my own right. The Queen of Mirth, who is not laughing.

"I thought you were leaving," he snaps.

"And I thought the Queen of Mirth was welcome wheresoever she goes," I hiss back.

"Assemble the Living Council in my rooms in the palace," he tells me, voice cold and remote and royal. "I will join you as soon as I can get away."

I nod and am halfway through the crowd when I realize two things: One, he gave me an order; and two, I obeyed it.

Once at the palace, I send out pages to summon the Council. I send Snapdragon with a message for my spies to discover where Nicasia has gone. I would have thought that she'd make herself available to hear Cardan's answer, but given that she was uncertain enough about Cardan's feelings to shoot a rival lover, maybe she's reluctant to hear it.

Even if she believes he'd choose her over a war, that's not saying much.

In my rooms, I strip off my clothes quickly and wash myself. I want to be rid of the perfume of the mushrooms, the stink of the fire, and the humiliation. It feels like a blessing to have my old clothing there. I pull on a dull brown dress, too simple for my current position but comforting all the same. I pull back my hair with ruthless severity.

Tatterfell is no longer around, but it's obvious she's been by. My rooms are tidy, my things pressed and hung.

And sitting on my dressing table, a note addressed to me: *From the Grand General of the High King's Army to His Majesty's Seneschal*.

I rip it open. The note is shorter than what is written on the envelope:

Come to the war room immediately. Do not wait for the Council.

My heart thuds dully. I consider pretending I didn't get the message and simply not go, but that would be cowardice.

If Madoc still has hopes of scheming Oak onto the throne, he can't let a marriage to the Undersea happen. He has no reason to know that, in this at least, I am entirely on his side. This is a good opportunity to get him to show his hand.

And so, I head reluctantly to his war room. It's familiar; I played here as a child, under a large wooden table covered in a map of Faerie, with little, carved figures to represent its Courts and armies. His "dolls," as Vivi used to call them.

When I let myself in, I find it dimly lit. Only a few candles burn low on a desk beside a few stiff chairs.

I recall reading a book curled up in one of those chairs while beside me violent plots were hatched.

Looking up from the very same chair, Madoc rises and gestures for me to sit opposite him, as though we are equals. He is being interestingly careful with me.

On the strategy board, there are only a few figures. Orlagh and Cardan, Madoc and a figure I do not recognize until I study it more carefully. It is myself I am looking at, rendered in carved wood. Seneschal. Spymaster. Kingmaker.

I am abruptly afraid of what I have done to make it onto that board.

"I got your note," I tell him, settling into a chair.

"After tonight, I thought you might be finally reconsidering some of the choices you made," he says.

I begin to speak, but he holds up a clawed hand to stop my words. "Were I you," he goes on, "my pride might lead me to pretend otherwise. The Folk cannot tell lies, as you know, not with our tongues. But we can deceive. And we are as capable of self-deceit as any mortal."

I am stung by his knowing I was crowned Queen of Mirth and laughed at by the Court. "You don't think I know what I'm doing?"

"Well," he says carefully, "not for certain. What I see is you humiliating yourself with the youngest and most foolish of princes. Did he promise you something?"

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from snapping at him. No matter how low I already feel, if he thinks me a fool, then a fool I must allow myself to

be. “I am seneschal to the High King, am I not?”

It’s just hard to dissemble with the laughter of the Court still ringing in my ears. With the foul dust of those mushrooms still in my hair and the memory of Cardan’s obnoxious words.

Excruciating. Alarming. Distressing.

Madoc sighs and spreads his hands in front of him. “Whether I like it or no, so long as Cardan wears the Blood Crown, he’s my king. I am sworn to him as surely as I was to his father, as surely as I would have been to Dain or even Balekin. The opportunity that presented itself at the coronation—the opportunity to change the course of destiny—is lost to me.”

He pauses. However he phrases it, the meaning is the same. The opportunity was lost because I stole it from him. I am the reason Oak is not the High King and Madoc isn’t using his influence to remake Elfhame in his image.

“But you,” Madoc says, “who are not bound by your words. Whose promises can be forsworn…”

I think of what he said to me after the last Living Council meeting, as we walked: *No oath binds you. If you regret your move, make another. There are games yet to play*. I see he has chosen this moment to expand upon his theme.

“You want me to betray Cardan,” I say, just to make things clear.

He stands and beckons me to the strategy table. “I don’t know what knowledge you have of the Queen of the Undersea from her daughter, but once, the Undersea was a place much like the land. It had many fiefdoms, with many rulers among the selkies and merfolk.

“When Orlagh came into power, she hunted down each of the smaller rulers and murdered them, so the whole Undersea would answer only to her. There are yet a few rulers of the sea she hasn’t brought beneath her thumb, a few too powerful and a few more too remote. But if she marries her daughter to Cardan, you can be sure she will push Nicasia to do the same on land.”

“Murder the heads of the smaller Courts?” I ask.

He smiles. “Of all the Courts. Perhaps at first it will seem like a series of accidents—or a few foolish orders. Or maybe it will be another bloodbath.”

I study him carefully. After all, the last bloodbath was at least partially his doing. “And do you disagree with Orlagh’s philosophy? Would you have done much the same were you the power behind the throne?”

“I wouldn’t have done it on behalf of the sea,” he says. “She means to have the land as her vassal.” He reaches for the table and picks up a small figurine, one carved to represent Queen Orlagh. “She believes in the forced peace of absolute rule.”

I look at the board.

“You wanted to impress me,” he says. “You guessed, rightly, that I would not see your true potential until you bested me. Consider me impressed, Jude. But it would be better for both of us to stop fighting each other and focus on our common interest: power.”

That hangs in the air ominously. A compliment delivered in the form of a threat. He goes on. “But now, come back to my side. Come back before I move against you in earnest.”

“What does coming back look like?” I ask.

He gives me an evaluating stare, as though wondering just how much to say out loud. “I have a plan. When the times comes, you can help me implement it.”

“A plan I didn’t help make and that you won’t tell me much about?” I ask. “What if I’m more interested in the power I already have?”

He smiles, showing his teeth. “Then I guess I don’t know my daughter very well. Because the Jude I knew would cut out that boy’s heart for what he did to you tonight.”

At the shame of having the revel thrown in my face, I snap. “You let me be humiliated in Faerie from the time I was a child. You’ve let Folk hurt me and laugh at me and mutilate me.” I hold up the hand with the missing fingertip, where one of his own guards bit it clean off. Another scar is at its center, from where Dain forced me to stick a dagger through my hand. “I’ve been glamoured and carried into a revel, weeping and alone. As far as I can tell, the only difference between tonight and all the other nights when I endured indignities without complaint is that those benefited you, and when I endure this, it benefits me.”

Madoc looks shaken. “I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t want to know,” I return.

He turns his gaze to the board, to the pieces on it, to the little figurine that represents me. “That argument’s a fine strike, right at my liver, but I am not so sure it does as well as a parry. The boy is unworthy—”

He would have kept on talking, but the door opens and Randalin is there, peering in, his robes of state looking hastily tugged on. “Oh, both of you. Good. The meeting is about to begin. Make haste.”

As I start to follow, Madoc grabs my arm. His voice is pitched low. “You tried to tell us that this was going to happen. All I ask from you tonight is that you use your power as seneschal to block any alliance with the Undersea.”

“Yes,” I say, thinking of Nicasia and Oak and all my plans. “That I can guarantee.”

CHAPTER 13

The Living Council gathers in the High King's enormous chambers, around a table inlaid with the symbol of the Greenbriar line, flowers and thorns with coiling roots.

Nihuar, Randalin, Baphen, and Mikkel are seated, while Fala stands in the middle of the floor singing a little song:

Fishies. Fishies. Putting on their feet.
Marry a fish and life will be sweet.
Fry her in a pan and pick out her bones.
Fishy blood is cold 'top a throne.

Cardan throws himself onto a nearby couch with dramatic flair, disdaining the table entirely. "This is ridiculous. Where is Nicasia?"

"We must discuss this offer," says Randalin.

"*Offer?*" scoffs Madoc, taking a seat. "The way it was delivered, I am not sure how he could marry the girl without seeming as though the land feared the sea and capitulated to its demands."

"Perhaps it was a trifle heavy-handed," says Nihuar.

"Time for us to prepare," Madoc says. "If it's war she wants, it is war we will give her. I will pull the salt from the sea before I let Elfhame tremble over Orlagh's wrath."

War, exactly what I feared Madoc would rush us into, and yet now it

arrives without his instigation.

“Well,” says Cardan, closing his eyes as though he is going to nap right there. “No need for me to do a thing then.”

Madoc’s lip curls. Randalin looks slightly discomposed. For so long, he wanted Cardan at meetings of the Living Council, but now he isn’t quite sure what to do with his actual presence.

“You could take Nicasia as your consort instead of your bride,” says Randalin. “Get an heir on her fit to rule over land and sea.”

“Now I am not to marry at Orlagh’s command, only breed?” Cardan demands.

“I want to hear from Jude,” Madoc says, to my enormous surprise.

The rest of the Council turns toward me. They seem utterly baffled by Madoc’s words. In meetings, my only value has been as a conduit between themselves and the High King. Now, with his representing himself, I might as well be one of the little wooden figures on a strategy board for all they expect me to speak.

“Whatever for?” Randalin wants to know.

“Because we didn’t heed her before. She told us that the Queen of the Undersea was going to move against the land. Had we attended her, we might not now be scrambling for strategy.”

Randalin winces.

“That’s true enough,” says Nihuar, as though she is trying to think of a way to explain away this troubling sign of competence.

“Perhaps she will tell us what else she knows,” Madoc says.

Mikkel’s eyebrows rise.

“Is there more?” Baphen asks.

“Jude?” prompts Madoc.

I weigh my next words. “As I said, Orlagh has been communicating with Balekin. I don’t know what information he’s passed on to her, but the sea sends Folk to the land with gifts and messages for him.”

Cardan looks surprised and clearly unhappy. I realize that I neglected to tell him about Balekin and the Undersea, despite informing the Council. “Did you know about Nicasia as well?” he asks.

“I, uh—” I begin, foundering.

“She likes to keep her own counsel on the Council,” Baphen says with a sly look.

As though it’s my fault none of them listens to me.

Randalin glowers. “You never explained how you learned any of this.”

“If you’re asking whether I have secrets, I could easily ask the same of you,” I remind him. “Previously, you weren’t interested in any of mine.”

“Prince of the land, prince under the waves,” says Fala. “Prince of prisons, prince of knaves.”

“Balekin’s no strategist,” Madoc says, which is as close to admitting he was behind Eldred’s execution as he’s ever done. “He’s ambitious, though. And proud.”

“*Spurn the Sea once, we will have your blood*,” says Cardan. “That’s Oak, I imagine.”

Madoc and I share a swift look. The one thing we agree on is that Oak will be kept safe. I am glad he’s far from here, inland, with both spies and knights looking out for him. But if Cardan is correct about what the line means, I wonder if he will need even more protection than that.

“If the Undersea is planning to steal Oak, then perhaps they promised Balekin the crown,” says Mikkel. “Safer for there to be only two in the bloodline, when one is needed to crown the other. Three is superfluous. Three is dangerous.”

Which is a roundabout way of saying somebody should kill Balekin before he tries to assassinate Cardan.

I wouldn’t mind seeing Balekin dead, either, but Cardan has been stubbornly against the execution of his brother. I think of the words he said to me in the Court of Shadows: *I may be rotten, but my one virtue is that I’m not a killer*.

“I will take that under advisement, advisors,” says Cardan. “Now, I wish to speak with Nicasia.”

“But we still haven’t decided…” Randalin says, trailing off when he sees the scorching glare Cardan levels at him.

“Jude, go fetch her,” says the High King of Elfhame. Another order.

I get up, grinding my teeth, and go to the door. The Ghost is waiting for me. “Where’s Nicasia?” I ask.

It turns out that she’s been put in my rooms, with the Roach. Her dove-gray dress is arranged on my divan as though she’s posing for a painting. I wonder if the reason she rushed off was so she could change clothing for this audience.

“Look what the wind blew in,” she says when she sees me.

“The High King requires your presence,” I tell her.

She gives me a strange smile and rises. “If only that were true.”

Down the hall we go, knights watching her pass. She looks majestic and miserable at once, and when the huge doors to Cardan’s apartments open, she goes inside with her head high.

While I was gone, a servant brought in tea. It steeps in a pot at the center of a low table. A cup of it steams in the cage of Cardan’s slender fingers.

“Nicasia,” he drawls. “Your mother has sent a message for us both.”

She frowns, taking in the other councilors, the lack of an invitation to sit, and the lack of an offer to take tea. “This was her scheme, not mine.”

He leans forward, no longer sleepy or bored but every bit the terrifying faerie lord, empty-eyed and incalculably powerful. “Perhaps, but you knew she’d do it, I’ll wager. Do not play with me. We know each other too well for tricks.”

Nicasia looks down, eyelashes brushing her cheeks. “She desires a different kind of alliance.” Perhaps the Council might see her as meek and humbled, but I am not yet so foolish.

Cardan stands, hurling his teacup at the wall, where it shatters. “Tell the Queen of the Undersea that if she threatens me again, she will find her daughter my prisoner instead of my bride.”

Nicasia looks stricken.

Randalin finally finds his voice. “It is not meet to throw things at the daughter of the Undersea.”

“Little fishie,” says Fala, “take off your legs and swim away.”

Mikkel barks out a laugh.

“We must not be hasty,” says Randalin helplessly. “Princess, let the High King take more time to consider.”

I worried that Cardan would be amused or flattered or tempted. Instead, he’s clearly furious.

“Let me speak with my mother.” Nicasia looks around the room, at the councilors, at me, before seeming to decide that she’s not going to persuade Cardan to send us away. She does the next best thing, turning her gaze only to him and speaking as though we’re not there. “The sea is harsh, and so are Queen Orlagh’s methods. She demands when she ought to request, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t wisdom in what she wants.”

“Would you marry me, then? Tie the sea to the land and bind us together in misery?” Cardan gazes at her with all the scorn he once reserved for me. It feels as though the world has been turned upside down.

But Nicasia does not back down. Instead, she takes a step closer. “We would be legends,” she tells him. “Legends need not concern themselves with something as small as happiness.”

And then, without waiting to be dismissed, she turns and goes out. Without being ordered, the guards part to let her by.

“Ah,” says Madoc. “That one behaves as though she is queen already.”

“Out,” says Cardan, and then when no one reacts, he makes a wild gesture in the air. “Out! Out. I am certain you wish to deliberate further as though I am not in the room, so go do it where I am not in the room. Go and trouble

me no more.”

“Your pardon,” says Randalin. “We meant only—”

“Out!” he says, at which point even Fala heads for the door.

“Except Jude,” he calls. “You, tarry a moment.”

You. I turn toward him, the humiliation of the night still hot on my skin. I think of all my secrets and plans, and of what it will mean if we go to war with the Undersea, of what I’ve risked and what is already forever lost.

I let the others leave, waiting until the last of the Living Council is out of the room.

“Give me an order again,” I say, “and I will show you true shame. Locke’s games will be as nothing to what I make you do.”

With that, I follow the others into the hall.

In the Court of Shadows, I consider what moves are possible.

Murder Balekin. Mikkel wasn’t wrong that it would make it harder for the Undersea to wrest the crown from Cardan’s head.

Marry Cardan to someone else. I think of Mother Marrow and almost regret interfering. If Cardan had a hag’s daughter for a bride, perhaps Orlagh wouldn’t have engaged in such martial matchmaking.

Of course, I would have had other problems.

A headache starts up behind my eyes. I rub my fingers over the bridge of my nose.

With Taryn’s wedding so close, Oak will be here in mere days. I don’t like the thought of it with Orlagh’s threat hanging over Elfhame. He is too valuable a piece on the strategy board, too necessary for Balekin, too dangerous for Cardan.

I recall the last time I saw Balekin, the influence he had over the guard, the way he behaved as though he were the king in exile. And all my reports from Vulciber suggest that not much has changed. He demands luxuries, he entertains visitors from the sea who leave puddles and pearls behind. I wonder what they’ve told him, what promises he’s been made. Despite Nicasia’s belief that he won’t be necessary, he must be hoping just the opposite.

And then I recall something else—the woman who wanted to tell me about my mother. She’s been there the whole time, and if she’s willing to sell one kind of information for her freedom, maybe she’s willing to sell another.

As I think over what I’d like to know, it occurs to me how much more

useful it would be to send information *to* Balekin, instead of getting information out of him.

If I let that prisoner believe I was temporarily freeing her to tell me about my mother, then I could drop some information in her ear. Something about Oak, something about his whereabouts or vulnerability. She wouldn't be lying when she passed it on; she would believe she'd heard true and spoke truth.

I puzzle further and realize, no, it's too soon for that. What I need now is to give the prisoner simpler information that she can pass on, information I can control and verify, so that I can be sure she's a good source.

Balekin wanted to send Cardan a message. I will find a way to let him.

The Court of Shadows has begun to formalize the scribing of documents on the denizens of Elfhame, but none of the current scrolls deal with any prisoners in the Tower but Balekin. Walking down the hall, I go to the Bomb's newly dug office.

She's there, throwing daggers at a painting of a sunset.

"You didn't like it?" I ask, pointing to the canvas.

"I liked it well enough," she says. "Now I like it better."

"I need a prisoner from the Tower of Forgetting. Do we have enough uniforms to dress up some of our new recruits? The knights there have seen my face. Vulciber can help smooth things over, but I'd rather not risk it. Better to forge some papers and have her out with fewer questions."

She frowns in concentration. "Whom do you want?"

"There's a woman." I take a piece of paper and grid out the bottom floor as well as I can. "She was up the staircase. Here. All on her own."

The Bomb frowns. "Can you describe her?"

I shrug. "Thin face, horns. Pretty, I guess. You're all pretty."

"What kind of horns?" the Bomb asks, tilting her head to one side as though she's considering something. "Straight? Curved?"

I gesture to the top of my head where I remember hers being. "Little ones. Goatish, I guess. And she had a tail."

"There aren't that many Folk in the Tower," the Bomb explains. "The woman you're describing…"

"Do you know her?" I ask.

"I've never spoken a word to her," the Bomb says. "But I know who she is—or who she was: one of Eldred's lovers who begot him a son. That's Cardan's mother."

CHAPTER 14

I drum my fingernails against Dain’s old desk as the Roach leads the prisoner in.

“Her name is Asha,” he says. “*Lady* Asha.”

Asha is thin and so pale that she seems a little gray. She does not look much like the laughing woman I saw in the crystal globe.

She is looking around the room in an ecstasy of confusion. It’s clear that she’s pleased to be away from the Tower of Forgetting. Her eyes are hungry, drinking in every detail of even this rather dull room.

“What was her crime?” I ask, downplaying my knowledge. I hope she will set the game and show more of herself that way.

The Roach grunts, playing along. “She was Eldred’s consort, and when he tired of her, she got tossed into the Tower.”

There was doubtlessly more to it than that, but all I have discovered is that it concerned the death of another lover of the High King’s and, somehow, Cardan’s involvement.

“Hard luck,” I say, indicating the chair in front of my desk. The one to which, five long months ago, Cardan had been tied. “Come sit.”

I can see his face in hers. They share those ridiculous cheekbones, that soft mouth.

She sits, gaze turning sharply to me. “I have a powerful thirst.”

“Do you now?” the Roach asks, licking a corner of his lip with his black tongue. “Perhaps a cup of wine would restore you.”

“I am chilled, too,” she tells him. “Cold down to the bone. Cold as the

sea.”

The Roach shares a look with me. “You tarry here with our own Shadow Queen, and I will see to the rest.”

I do not know what I did to deserve such an extravagant title and fear it has been bestowed upon me as one might bestow an enormous troll with the moniker “Tiny,” but it does seem to impress her.

The Roach steps out, leaving us alone. My gaze follows him for a moment, thinking of the Bomb and her secret. Then I turn to Lady Asha.

“You said you knew my mother,” I remind her, hoping to draw her out with that, until I can figure out how to move on to what I really must know.

Her expression is of slight surprise, as though she is so distracted by her surroundings that she forgot her reason for being here. “You resemble her very strongly.”

“Her secrets,” I prompt. “You said you knew secrets about her.”

Finally, she smiles. “Eva found it tedious to have to do without everything from her old life. Oh, it was fun for her at first to be in Faerieland—it always is—but eventually they get homesick. We used to sneak across the sea to be among mortals and take back little things she missed. Bars of waxy chocolate. Perfume. Pantyhose. That was before Justin, of course.”

Justin and Eva. Eva and Justin. My mother and my father. My stomach lurches at the thought of their being two people Asha knew better than I ever did.

“Of course,” I echo anyway.

She leans forward, across the desk. “You look like her. You look like them both.”

And you look like him, I think but do not say.

“You’ve heard the story, I’ll wager,” Asha says. “How one or both of them killed a woman and burned the body to hide your mother’s disappearance from Madoc. I could tell you about that. I could tell you how it happened.”

“I brought you here so you could do just that,” I tell her. “So you could tell me everything you know.”

“Then have me thrown back in the Tower? No. My information is worth a price.”

Before I can answer, the door opens, and the Roach comes in carrying a tray piled with cheese and brown bread and a steaming cup of spiced wine. He wears a cape over his shoulders, and after setting down the food, he sweeps it onto her like a blanket.

“Any other requests?” he asks.

“She was just getting to that,” I tell him.

“Freedom,” she says. “I wish to be away from the Tower of Forgetting,

and I wish safe passage away from Insmoor, Insweal, and Insmire. Moreover, I want your promise that the High King of Elfhame will never become aware of my release."

"Eldred is dead," I tell her. "You have nothing to worry about."

"I know who the High King is," she corrects sharply. "And I don't want to be discovered by him once I am free."

The Roach's eyebrows rise.

In the silence, she takes a big swallow of wine. She bites off a big hunk of cheese.

It occurs to me that Cardan very likely knows where his mother was sent. If he has done nothing to get her out, nothing to so much as see her since becoming High King, that's intentional. I think of the boy in the crystal orb and the worshipful way he stared after her, and I wondered what changed. I barely remember my mother, but I would do a lot to see her again, even just for a moment.

"Tell me something of value," I say. "And I will consider it."

"So I am to have nothing today?" she wants to know.

"Have we not fed you and clothed you in our own garments? Moreover, you may take a turn around the gardens before you return to the Tower. Drink in the scents of the flowers and feel the grass beneath your feet," I tell her. "Let me make myself clear: I do not beg for comforting reminiscences or love stories. If you have something better to give me, then perhaps I will find something for you. But do not think I need you."

She pouts. "Very well. There was a hag who came across Madoc's land when your mother was pregnant with Vivienne. The hag was given to prophecy and divined futures in eggshells. And do you know what the hag said? That Eva's child was destined to be a greater weapon than Justin could ever forge."

"Vivi?" I demand.

"Her child," says Asha. "Although she must have thought of the one in her belly right then. Perhaps that's why she left. To protect the child from fate. But no one can escape fate."

I am silent, my mouth a grim line. Cardan's mother takes another drink of wine.

I will not let any of what I feel show on my face. "Still not enough," I say, taking a breath that I hope isn't too quavering and focusing on passing the information I hope will find its way to Balekin. "If you think of something better, you can send me a message. Our spies monitor notes going in and out of the Tower of Forgetting—usually at the point they're passed to the palace. Whatever you send, no matter to whom it is addressed, if it leaves the hand of

the guard, we will see it. It will be easy to let me know if your memory comes up with anything of more value."

With that, I get up and step out of the room. The Roach follows me into the hall and puts a hand on my arm.

For a long moment, I stand there wordlessly trying to marshal my thoughts.

He shakes his head. "I asked her some questions on the way here. It sounds as though she was entranced by palace life, besotted with the High King's regard, glorying in the dancing and the singing and the wine. Cardan was left to be suckled by a little black cat whose kittens came stillborn."

"He survived on cat milk?" I exclaim. The Roach gives me a look, as though I've missed the point of his story entirely.

"After she was sent to the Tower, Cardan was sent to Balekin," he says.

I think again of the globe I held in Eldred's study, of Cardan dressed in rags, looking to the woman in my chamber for approval, which came only when he was awful. An abandoned prince, weaned on cat milk and cruelty, left to roam the palace like a little ghost. I think of myself, huddling in a tower of Hollow Hall, watching Balekin enchant a mortal into beating his younger brother for poor swordsmanship.

"Take her back to the Tower," I tell the Roach.

He raises his eyebrows. "You don't want to hear more about your parents?"

"She gets too much satisfaction in the telling. I'll have the information from her without so many bargains." Besides, I have planted a more important seed. Now I have only to see if it grows.

He gives me a half smile. "You like it, don't you? Playing games with us? Pulling our strings and seeing how we dance?"

"The Folk, you mean?"

"I imagine you'd like it as well with mortals, but we're what you're practiced in." He doesn't sound disapproving, but it still feels like being skewered on a pin. "And perhaps some of us offer a particular savor."

He looks down his curved goblin nose at me until I answer. "Is that meant to be a compliment?"

At that, his smile blooms. "It's no insult."

CHAPTER 15

Gowns arrive the next day, boxes of them, along with coats and cunning little jackets, velvet pants and tall boots. They all look as though they belong to someone ferocious, someone both better and worse than me.

I dress myself, and before I am done, Tatterfell comes in. She insists on sweeping back my hair and catching it up in a new comb, one carved in the shape of a toad with a single cymophane gem for an eye.

I look at myself in a coat of black velvet tipped with silver and think of the care with which Taryn chose the piece. I want to think about that and nothing else.

Once, she said that she hated me a little for being witness to her humiliation with the Gentry. I wonder if that's why I have such a hard time forgetting about what happened with Locke, because she saw it, and whenever I see her, I remember all over again how it felt to be made a fool.

When I look at my new clothes, though, I think of all the good things that come from someone knowing you well enough to understand your hopes and fears. I may not have told Taryn all the awful things I've done and the terrible skills I've acquired, but she's dressed me as though I had.

In my new clothes, I make my way to a hastily called Council meeting and listen as they debate back and forth whether Nicasia took Cardan's angry message back to Orlagh and whether fish can fly (that's Fala).

"Whether or not she did doesn't matter," says Madoc. "The High King has made his position clear. If he won't marry, then we have to assume that Orlagh is going to fulfill her threats. Which means she's going to go after his

blood.”

“You are moving very fast,” says Randalin. “Ought we not yet consider that the treaty might still hold?”

“What good does it do to consider that?” asks Mikkel with a sidelong glance at Nihuar. “The Unseelie Courts do not survive on wishes.”

The Seelie representative purses her small insect-like mouth.

“The stars say that this is a time of great upheaval,” says Baphen. “I see a new monarch coming, but whether that’s a sign of Cardan deposed or Orlagh overturned or Nicasia made queen, I cannot say.”

“I have a plan,” says Madoc. “Oak will be here in Elfhame very soon. When Orlagh sends her people after him, I mean to catch her out.”

“No,” I say, surprising everyone into looking my way. “You’re not going to use Oak as bait.”

Madoc doesn’t seem particularly offended by my outburst. “It may seem that’s what I am doing—”

“Because you are.” I glare at him, remembering all the reasons I didn’t want Oak to be High King in the first place, with Madoc as his regent.

“If Orlagh plans to hunt Oak, then it’s better we know when she will strike than wait for her to move. And the best way to know is to engineer an opportunity.”

“How about *removing* opportunity instead?” I say.

Madoc shakes his head. “That’s nothing but the wishes Mikkel cautioned against. I’ve already written to Vivienne. They plan to arrive within the week.”

“Oak can’t come here,” I say. “It was bad enough before, but not now.”

“You think the mortal world is safe?” Madoc scoffs. “You think the Undersea cannot reach him there? Oak is my son, I am the Grand General of Elfhame, and I know my business. Make any arrangement you like for protecting him, but leave the rest to me. This is no time for an attack of nerves.”

I grind my teeth. “Nerves?”

He gives me a steady look. “It’s easy to put your own life on the line, isn’t it? To make peace with danger. But a strategist must sometimes risk others, even those we love.” He gives me a significant look, perhaps to remind me that I once poisoned him. “For the good of Elfhame.”

But I bite my tongue again. This is not a conversation that I am likely to get anywhere with in front of the entire Council. Especially since I’m not sure I’m right.

I need to find out more of the Undersea’s plans, and I need to do so quickly. If there’s any alternative to risking Oak, I mean to find it.

Randalin has more questions about the High King's personal guard. Madoc wants the lower Courts to send more than their usual allotment of troops. Both Nihuar and Mikkel have objections. I let the words wash over me, trying to corral my thoughts.

As the meeting breaks up, a page comes up to me with two messages. One is from Vivi, delivered to the palace, asking me to come and bring her and Oak and Heather to Elfhame for Taryn's wedding in a day's time—sooner even than Madoc suggested. The second is from Cardan, summoning me to the throne room.

Cursing under my breath, I start to leave, then Randalin catches my sleeve.

"Jude," he says. "Allow me to give you a word of advice."

I wonder if I am about to be scolded.

"The seneschal isn't just the voice of the king," he says. "You're his hands as well. If you don't like working with General Madoc, find a new Grand General, one who hasn't previously committed treason."

I knew that Randalin was often at odds with Madoc in Council meetings, but I had no idea he wanted to eliminate him. And yet, I don't trust Randalin any more than I do Madoc.

"An interesting thought," I say in what I hope is a neutral manner before making my escape.

Cardan is lounging sideways on the throne when I come in, one long leg hanging over an armrest.

Sleepy revelers party yet in the great hall, around tables still piled high with delights. The smell of freshly turned earth and freshly spilled wine hangs in the air. As I make my way to the dais, I see Taryn asleep on a rug. A pixie boy I do not know slumbers beside her, his tall dragonfly wings twitching occasionally, as though in dreams of flight.

Locke is wide awake, sitting on the edge of the dais, yelling at musicians.

Frustrated, Cardan shifts, legs falling to the floor. "What exactly is the problem here?"

A boy with the lower half of a deer steps forward. I recognize him from the Hunter's Moon revel, where he played. His voice shakes when he speaks. "Your pardon, Your Majesty. It is only that my lyre was stolen."

"So what are we debating?" Cardan says. "A lyre is either here or gone, is it not? If it's gone, let a fiddler play."

"He stole it." The boy points to one of the other musicians, this one with hair like grass.

Cardan turns toward the thief with an impatient frown.

"*My* lyre was strung with the hair of beautiful mortals who died tragically young," sputters the grass-haired faerie. "It took me decades to assemble and was not easy to maintain. The mortal voices sung mournfully when I played. It could have made even yourself cry, begging your pardon."

Cardan makes an impatient gesture. "If you are done with bragging, what is the meat of this matter? I have not asked you about *your* instrument, but *his*."

The grass-haired faerie seems to blush, his skin turning a darker green—which I suppose is not actually the color of his flesh but of his blood. "He borrowed it of an eve," he says, pointing toward the deer-boy. "After that, be became obsessed and would not rest until he'd destroyed it. I only took *his* lyre in recompense, for though it is inferior, I must play something."

"You ought to punish them both," says Locke. "For bringing such a trivial concern before the High King."

"Well?" Cardan turns back to the boy who first claimed his lyre was stolen. "Shall I render my judgment?"

"Not yet, I beg of you," says the deer-boy, his ears twitching with nerves. "When I played his lyre, the voices of those who had died and whose hair made the strings spoke to me. They were the true owners of the lyre. And when I destroyed it, I was saving them. They were trapped, you see."

Cardan flops onto his throne, tipping back his head in frustration, knocking his crown askew. "Enough," he says. "You are both thieves, and neither of you particularly skilled ones."

"But you don't understand the torment, the screaming—" Then the deer-boy presses a hand over his mouth, recalling himself in the presence of the High King.

"Have you never heard that virtue is its *own* reward?" Cardan says pleasantly. "That's because there's no *other* reward in it."

The boy scuffs his hoof on the floor.

"You stole a lyre and your lyre was stolen in turn," Cardan says softly. "There's some justice in that." He turns to the grass-haired musician. "And you took matters into your own hands, so I can only assume they were arranged to your satisfaction. But both of you have irritated me. Give me that instrument."

Both look displeased, but the grass-haired musician comes forward and surrenders the lyre to a guard.

"Each of you will have a chance to play it, and whosoever plays most sweetly, you will have it. For art is more than virtue or vice."

I make my careful way up the steps as the deer-boy begins his playing. I

didn’t expect Cardan to care enough to hear out the musicians, and I can’t decide if his judgment is brilliant or if he is just a jerk. I worry that once again I am reading what I want to be true into his actions.

The music is haunting, thrumming across my skin and down to my bones.

“Your Majesty,” I say. “You sent for me?”

“Ah, yes.” His raven’s-wing hair falls over one eye. “So are we at war?”

For a moment, I think he is talking about us. “No,” I say. “At least not until the next full moon.”

“You can’t fight the sea,” Locke says philosophically.

Cardan gives a little laugh. “You can fight anything. Winning, though, that’s something else again. Isn’t that right, Jude?”

“Jude is a real winner,” Locke says with a grin. Then he looks out at the players and claps his hands. “Enough. Switch.”

When Cardan doesn’t contradict his Master of Revels, the deer-boy reluctantly turns over the lyre to the grass-haired faerie. A fresh wash of music rushes through the hill, a wild tune to speed my heart.

“You were just going,” I tell Locke.

He grins. “I find I am very comfortable here,” Locke says. “Surely there’s nothing you have to say to the king that is so very personal or private.”

“It’s a shame you’ll never find out. Go. Now.” I think about Randalin’s advice, his reminder that I have power. Maybe I do, but I am still unable to get rid of a Master of Revels for a half hour, no less a Grand General who is also, more or less, my father.

“Leave,” Cardan tells Locke. “I didn’t summon her here for *your* pleasure.”

“You are most ungenerous. If you truly cared for me, you would have,” Locke says as he hops down from the dais.

“Take Taryn home,” I call after him. If it wasn’t for her, I would punch him right in the face.

“He likes you this way, I think,” Cardan says. “Flush-cheeked and furious.”

“I don’t care what he likes,” I spit out.

“You seem to *not* care quite a lot.” His voice is dry, and when I look at him, I cannot read his face.

“Why am I here?” I ask.

He kicks his legs off the side of the throne and stands. “You,” he points to the deer-boy. “Today you are fortunate. Take the lyre. See that neither of you draw my notice again.” As the deer-boy bows and the grass-haired faerie begins to sulk, Cardan turns to me. “Come.”

Ignoring his high-handed manner with some difficulty, I follow him

behind the throne and off the dais, where a small door is set against the stone wall, half-hidden by ivy. I've never been here before.

Cardan sweeps aside the ivy, and we go inside.

It is a small room, clearly intended for intimate meetings and assignations. Its walls are covered in moss, with small glowing mushrooms climbing them, casting a pale white light on us. There's a low couch, upon which people could sit or recline, as the situation called for.

We are alone in a way we have not been alone for a long time, and when he takes a step toward me, my heart skips a beat.

Cardan's eyebrows rise. "My brother sent me a message." He unfolds it from his pocket:

If you want to save your neck, pay me a visit. And put your seneschal on a leash.

"So," he says, holding it out to me. "What have you been about?"

I let out a sigh of relief. It didn't take long for Lady Asha to pass the information I gave her to Balekin, and it didn't take long for Balekin to act on it. One point to me.

"I stopped you from getting some messages," I admit.

"And you decided not to mention them." Cardan looks at me without particular rancor but is not exactly pleased. "Just as you declined to tell me about Balekin's meetings with Orlagh or Nicasia's plans for me."

"Look, of course Balekin wants to see you," I say, trying to redirect the conversation away from his sadly incomplete list of stuff I haven't told him. "You're his brother, whom he kept in his own house. You're the only person with the power to free him who might actually do it. I figured if you were in a forgiving mood, you could talk to him anytime you wanted. You didn't need his exhortations."

"So what changed?" he asks, waving the piece of paper at me. Now he does sound angry. "Why was I permitted to receive this?"

"I gave him a source of information," I say. "One it's possible for me to compromise."

"And I am supposed to reply to this little note?" he asks.

"Have him brought to you in chains." I take the paper from him and jam it into my pocket. "I'd be interested to know what he thinks he can get from you with a little conversation, especially since he doesn't know you're aware of his ties to the Undersea."

Cardan's gaze narrows. The worst part is that I am deceiving him again right now, deceiving by omission. Hiding that my source of information, the one I can now compromise, is his own mother.

I thought you wanted me to do this on my own, I want to say. *I thought I*

was supposed to rule and you were supposed to be merry and that was supposed to be that.

"I suspect he will try to shout at me until I give him what he wants," Cardan says. "It might be possible to goad him into letting something slip. Possible, not likely."

I nod, and the scheming part of my brain, honed on strategy games, supplies me with a move. "Nicasia knows more than she's saying. Make her say the rest of it, and then use that against Balekin."

"Yes, well, I don't think it would be politically expedient to put thumbscrews to a princess of the sea."

I look at him again, at his soft mouth and his high cheekbones, at the cruel beauty of his face. "Not thumbscrews. You. You go to Nicasia and charm her."

His eyebrows go up.

"Oh, come on," I say, the plan coming together in my mind as I am speaking, a plan that I hate as surely as I know it will be effective. "You're practically draped in courtiers every time I see you."

"I'm the *king*," he says.

"They've been draped over you for longer than that." I am frustrated having to explain this. Surely he's aware of the response of the Folk to him.

He makes an impatient gesture. "You mean back when I was merely the *prince*?"

"Use your wiles," I say, exasperated and embarrassed. "I'm sure you've got some. She wants you. It shouldn't be difficult."

His eyebrows, if anything, climb higher. "You're seriously suggesting I do this."

I take a breath, realizing that I am going to have to convince him that it will work. And that I know something that might. "Nicasia's the one who came through the passageway and shot that girl you were kissing," I say.

"You mean she tried to kill me?" he asks. "Honestly, Jude, how many secrets are you keeping?"

I think of his mother again and bite my tongue. Too many. "She was shooting at the girl, not you. She found you in bed with someone, got jealous, and shot twice. Unfortunately for you, but fortunately for everyone else, she's a terrible shot. Now do you believe me that she wants you?"

"I know not what to believe," he says, clearly angry, maybe at her, maybe at me, probably at both of us.

"She thought to surprise you in your bed. Give her what she wants, and get the information we need to avoid a war."

He stalks toward me, close enough that I can feel his breath stirring my

hair. “Are you commanding me?”

“No,” I say, startled and unable to meet his gaze. “Of course not.”

His fingers come to my chin, tilting my head so I am looking up into his black eyes, the rage in them as hot as coals. “You just think I ought to. That I can. That I’d be good at it. Very well, Jude. Tell me how it’s done. Do you think she’d like it if I came to her like this, if I looked deeply into her eyes?”

My whole body is alert, alive with sick desire, embarrassing in its intensity.

He knows. I know he knows.

“Probably,” I say, my voice coming out a little shakily. “Whatever it is you usually do.”

“Oh, come now,” he says, his voice full of barely controlled fury. “If you want me to play the bawd, at least give me the benefit of your advice.”

His beringed fingers trace over my cheek, trace the line of my lip and down my throat. I feel dizzy and overwhelmed. “Should I touch her like this?” he asks, lashes lowered. The shadows limn his face, casting his cheekbones into stark relief.

“I don’t know,” I say, but my voice betrays me. It’s all wrong, high and breathless.

He presses his mouth to my ear, kissing me there. His hands skim over my shoulders, making me shiver. “And then like this? Is this how I ought to seduce her?” I can feel his mouth shape the light words against my skin. “Do you think it would work?”

I dig my fingernails into the meat of my palm to keep from moving against him. My whole body is trembling with tension. “Yes.”

Then his mouth is against mine, and my lips part. I close my eyes against what I’m about to do. My fingers reach up to tangle in the black curls of his hair. He doesn’t kiss me as though he’s angry; his kiss is soft, yearning.

Everything slows, goes liquid and hot. I can barely think.

I’ve wanted this and feared it, and now that it’s happening, I don’t know how I will ever want anything else.

We stumble back to the low couch. He leans me back against the cushions, and I pull him down over me. His expression mirrors my own, surprise and a little horror.

“Tell me again what you said at the revel,” he says, climbing over me, his body against mine.

“What?” I can barely think.

“That you hate me,” he says, his voice hoarse. “Tell me that you hate me.”

“I hate you,” I say, the words coming out like a caress. I say it again, over and over. A litany. An enchantment. A ward against what I really feel. “I hate

you. I hate you. I hate you.”

He kisses me harder.

“I hate you,” I breathe into his mouth. “I hate you so much that sometimes I can’t think of anything else.”

At that, he makes a harsh, low sound.

One of his hands slides over my stomach, tracing the shape of my skin. He kisses me again, and it’s like falling off a cliff. Like a mountain slide, building momentum with every touch, until there is only crashing destruction ahead.

I have never felt anything like this.

He begins to unbutton my doublet, and I try not to freeze, try not to show my inexperience. I don’t want him to stop.

It feels like a geas. It has all the sinister pleasure of sneaking out of the house, all the revolting satisfaction of stealing. It reminds me of the moment before I slammed a blade through my hand, amazed at my own capacity for self-betrayal.

He leans up to pull off his own jacket, and I try to wriggle out of mine. He looks at me and blinks, as through a fog. “This is an absolutely terrible idea,” he says with a kind of amazement in his voice.

“Yes,” I tell him, kicking off my boots.

I am wearing hose, and I don’t think there’s an elegant way to strip them off. Certainly, I don’t find it. Tangled in the fabric, feeling foolish, I realize I could stop this now. I could gather up my things and go. But I don’t.

He shucks his cuffed white shirt over his head in a single elegant gesture, revealing bare skin and scars. My hands are shaking. He captures them and kisses my knuckles with a kind of reverence.

“I want to tell you so many lies,” he says.

I shudder, and my heart hammers as his hands skim over my skin, one sliding between my thighs. I mirror him, fumbling with the buttons of his breeches. He helps me push them down, his tail curling against his leg then twisting to coil against mine, soft as a whisper. I reach over to slide my hand over the flat plane of his stomach. I don’t let myself hesitate, but my inexperience is obvious. His skin is hot under my palm, against my calluses. His fingers are too clever by half.

I feel as though I am drowning in sensation.

His eyes are open, watching my flushed face, my ragged breathing. I try to stop myself from making embarrassing noises. It’s more intimate than the way he’s touching me, to be looked at like that. I hate that he knows what he’s doing and I don’t. I hate being vulnerable. I hate that I throw my head back, baring my throat. I hate the way I cling to him, the nails of one hand digging into his back, my thoughts splintering, and the single last thing in my head:

that I like him better than I’ve ever liked anyone and that of all the things he’s ever done to me, making me like him so much is by far the worst.

CHAPTER 16

One of the hardest things to do as a spy, as a strategist, or even just as a person, is wait. I recall the Ghost's lessons, making me sit for hours with a crossbow in my hand without my mind wandering, waiting for the perfect shot.

So much of winning is waiting.

The other part, though, is taking the shot when it comes. Unleashing all that momentum.

In my rooms again, I remind myself of that. I can't afford to be distracted. Tomorrow, I need to get Vivi and Oak from the mortal world, and I need to come up with either a scheme better than Madoc's or a way to make Madoc's scheme safer for Oak.

I concentrate on what I am going to say to Vivi, instead of thinking of Cardan. I do not want to consider what happened between us. I do not want to think about the way his muscles moved or how his skin felt or the soft gasping sounds he made or the slide of his mouth against mine.

I definitely don't want to think about how hard I had to bite my own lip to keep quiet. Or how obvious it was that I'd never done any of the things we did, no less the things we didn't do.

Every time I think of any of it, I shove the memory away as fiercely as possible. I shove it along with the enormous vulnerability I feel, the feeling of being exposed down to my raw nerves. I do not know how I will face Cardan again without behaving like a fool.

If I cannot attack the problem of the Undersea and I cannot attack the

problem of Cardan, then perhaps I can take care of something else.

It is a relief to don a suit of dark fabric and high leather boots, to holster blades at my wrists and calves. It is a relief to do something physical, heading through the woods and then slyfooting my way into a poorly guarded house. When one of the residents comes in, my knife is at his throat faster than he can speak.

"Locke," I say sweetly. "Are you surprised?"

He turns to me, dazzling smile faltering. "My blossom. What is this?"

After an astonished moment, I realize that he thinks I am Taryn. Can he really not tell the difference between us?

A bitter pit where my heart should be is pleased by the thought.

"If you think my sister would put a knife to your throat, perhaps you should delay your nuptials," I tell him, taking a step back and pointing to a chair with the point. "Go ahead. Sit."

He sits down just as I kick the chair, sending it backward and him sprawling to the floor. He rolls over, glaring at me with indignation. "Unchivalrous," is all he says, but there's something in his face that wasn't there before.

Fear.

For five months I have tried to use every bit of restraint I learned over a lifetime of keeping my head down. I have tried to behave as though I had only dribs and drabs of power, an important servant's power, and still keep in my head that I was in charge. A balancing act that makes me think of Val Moren's lesson in juggling.

I have allowed the Locke situation to get out of hand.

I place my foot on his chest, pressing down a little to remind him that if I kicked hard, it could shatter bone.

"I am done with being polite. We're not going to play word games or make up riddles. Humiliating the High King is a bad idea. Humiliating me is a terrible idea. Running around on my sister is just dumb. Maybe you thought I was too *busy* to take my revenge? Well, Locke, I want you to understand that for you, I will *make time*."

His face pales. He's obviously not sure what to make of me right now. He knows I stabbed Valerian once, but he doesn't know I killed him, nor that I have killed since then. He has no idea I became a spy and then a spymaster. Even the sword fight with Taryn was something he only heard about.

"Making you Queen of Mirth was a jest," Locke says, gazing up at me from the floor with a kind of fondness in his fox eyes, a little smile on the corner of his mouth, as though he's willing me to grin along with him. "Come on, Jude, let me up. Am I really to believe you'd harm me?"

My voice is mock-sweet. “You once accused me of playing the great game. What was it you called it: ‘the game of kings and princes, of queens and crowns’? But to play it well, I must be pitiless.”

He begins to get up, but I press down harder with my foot and shift the grip on my knife. He stops moving. “You always liked stories,” I remind him. “You said you wanted to create the sparks of stories. Well, the tale of a twin who murders her sister’s betrothed is a good one, don’t you think?”

He closes his eyes and holds out his empty hands. “Peace, Jude. Perhaps I overplayed my hand. But I cannot believe you want to murder me for it. Your sister would be devastated.”

“Better she never be a bride than wind up a widow,” I say, but take my foot off his chest. He gets up slowly, dusting himself off. Once on his feet, he looks around the room as though he doesn’t quite recognize his own manor now that he’s seen it from the vantage of the floor.

“You’re right,” I continue. “I don’t want to harm you. We are to be family. You will be my brother and I your sister. Let us make friends. But to do that, I need you to do some things for me.

“First, stop trying to make me uncomfortable. Stop trying to turn me into a character in one of your dramas. Pick another target to weave stories around.

“Second, whatever your issue is with Cardan, whatever pushed you to make such a meal of toying with him, whatever made you think it was a fun to steal his lover and then throw her over for a mortal girl—as though you wanted him to know the thing dearest to him was worth nothing to you—let it go. Whatever made you decide to make me Queen of Mirth to torment him with the feelings you suspected he had, leave off. He’s the High King, and it’s too dangerous.”

“Dangerous,” he says, “but *fun*.”

I don’t smile. “Humiliate the king before the Court, and the courtiers will spread rumors and his subjects will forget to be afraid. Soon, the lesser Courts will think they can go against him.”

Locke leans down to right the broken chair, leaning it against a nearby table when it becomes clear it won’t stand on its own. “Oh, fine, you’re angry with me. But think. You may be Cardan’s seneschal and you’ve obviously fascinated him with your hips and lips and warm mortal skin, but I know that in your heart, whatever he has promised you, you still hate him. You’d love to see him brought low in front of his entire Court. Why, if you hadn’t been dressed in rags and been laughed at, you’d probably have forgiven me for every wrongdoing I’ve ever committed against you, just for engineering that.”

“You’re wrong,” I say.

He smiles. “Liar.”

“Even if I did like it,” I say. “It must end.”

He seems to be evaluating how serious I am and of what I am capable. I am sure he is seeing the girl he brought home, the one he kissed and tricked. He is wondering, probably not for the first time, how I lucked into being made seneschal, how I managed to get my hands on the crown of Elfhame to orchestrate my little brother’s putting it on Cardan’s head.

“The last thing is this,” I say. “You’re going to be faithful to Taryn. Unless she’s screwing around on you or with you, once you’re wed, there are going to be no more affairs.”

He stares at me in blankly. “Are you accusing me of not caring for your sister?” he asks.

“If I truly believed you didn’t care for Taryn, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

He gives a long sigh. “Because you’d murder me?”

“If you’re playing with Taryn, Madoc will murder you; I won’t even get a chance.”

I sheath my knife and head toward the door.

“Your ridiculous family might be surprised to find that not everything is solved by murder,” Locke calls after me.

“We *would* be surprised to find that,” I call back.

CHAPTER 17

In the five months that Vivi and Oak have been gone, I have visited the mortal world only twice. Once to help them set up their apartment, and the second time for a wine party Heather threw for Vivi's birthday. At it, Taryn and I sat awkwardly on the edge of a couch, eating cheese with oily olives, being allowed little sips of Shiraz by college girls because we were "too young to legally drink." My nerves were on edge the whole night, wondering what trouble was happening in my absence.

Madoc had sent Vivi a present, and Taryn had faithfully carried it across the sea—a golden dish of salt that never emptied. Turn it over, and it's full again. I found it to be a nervous-making present, but Heather had only laughed, as though it was some kind of novelty with a trick bottom.

She didn't believe in magic.

How Heather was going to react to Taryn's wedding was anyone's guess. All I hoped was that Vivienne had warned her about at least some of what was about to happen. Otherwise, the news that mermaids were real was going to come along with the news that mermaids were out to get us. I didn't think "all at once" was the ideal way to hear any of that news.

After midnight, the Roach and I go across the sea in a boat made of river rushes and breath. We carry a cargo of mortals who have been tunneling out new rooms in the Court of Shadows. Taken from their beds just after dusk, they will be returned just before dawn. When they wake, they will find gold coins scattered in their sheets and filling their pockets. Not faerie gold, which blows away like dandelion puffs and leaves behind leaves and stones, but real

gold—a month's wages for a single stolen night.

You might think I am heartless to allow this, no less order it. Maybe I am. But they made a bargain, even if they didn't understand with whom they were making it. And I can promise that besides the gold, all they are left with in the morning is exhaustion. They will not remember their journey to Elfhame, and we will not take them twice.

On the trip over, they sit quietly on the boat, lost in dreams as the swells of the sea and the wind propel us witherward. Overhead, Snapdragon keeps pace, looking for trouble. I gaze at the waves and think of Nicasia, imagine webbed hands on the sides of the vessel, imagine sea Folk clawing their way aboard.

You can't fight the sea, Locke said. I hope he's wrong.

Near the shore, I climb out, stepping into the shock of icy water at my calves and black rocks under my feet, then clamber over them, leaving the boat to come apart as the Roach's magic fades from it. Snapdragon heads off to the east to scout for future workers.

The Roach and I put each mortal to bed, occasionally beside a sleeping lover we take care not to wake as we ply them with gold. I feel like a faerie in a story, slyfooting my way through homes, able to drink the cream off the milk or put knots in a child's hair.

"This is usually a lonely business," the Roach says when we're finished. "Your company was a pleasure. There's hours yet between dawn and waking, come sup with me."

It's true that it's still too early to pick up Vivi and Heather and Oak. It's also true that I am hungry. I have a tendency these days to put off eating until I am ravenous. I feel a little like a snake, either starved or swallowing a mouse whole. "Okay."

The Roach suggests we go to a diner. I do not tell him I've never been to one. Instead, I follow him through the woods. We come out near a highway. Across the road rests a building, brightly lit and shiny with chrome. Beside it is a sign proclaiming it to be open twenty-four hours, and the parking lot is enormous, big enough even for several trucks already parked there. This early in the morning, there is barely any traffic, and we are able to ford the highway easily.

Inside, I slide obediently into the booth he chooses. He snaps his fingers, and the little box beside our table springs to life, blaring music. I flinch, surprised, and he laughs.

A waitress comes by the table, a pen with a thoroughly chewed cap stuck behind her ear, like in the movies. "Something to drink?" she says, the words running together so that it takes a moment to understand she's asked a

question.

“Coffee,” the Roach says. “Black as the eyes of the High King of Elfhame.”

The waitress just stares at him for a long blink, then scratches something on her pad and turns to me.

“Same,” I say, not sure what else they have.

When she’s gone, I open the menu and look at the pictures. It turns out they have *everything*. Piles of food. Chicken wings, bright and gleaming with glaze beside little pots of white sauce. A pile of chopped potatoes, fried to a turn, topped with crisped sausages and bubbling eggs. Wheat cakes larger than my spread hand, buttered and glistening with syrup.

“Did you know,” the Roach inquires. “Your people once believed the Folk came and took the wholesomeness out of mortal food?”

“Did they?” I ask with a grin.

He shrugs. “Some tricks may be lost to time. But I grant that mortal food does possess a great deal of substance.”

The waitress comes back with hot coffees, and I warm my hands on the cup while the Roach orders fried pickles and buffalo wings, a burger, and a milkshake. I order an omelet with mushrooms and something called pepper jack cheese.

“So,” says the Roach. “When will you tell the king about his mother?”

“She doesn’t want me to,” I say.

The Roach frowns. “You’ve made improvements in the Court of Shadows. You’re young, but you’re ambitious in the way that perhaps only the young can be. I judge you by three things and three things only—how square you are with us, how capable, and what you want for the world.”

“Where does Lady Asha come into any of that?” I ask, just as the waitress returns with our food. “Because I can already sense that she does. You didn’t open with that question for nothing.”

My omelet is enormous, an entire henhouse of eggs. My mushrooms are identically shaped, as though someone had ground up real mushrooms and then made cookie-cutter versions. They taste that way, too. With the Roach’s food piled up on the other side, soon the table is full to groaning.

He takes a bite of a wing and licks his lips with his black tongue. “Cardan is part of the Court of Shadows. We may play the world, but we don’t play one another. Hiding messages from Balekin is one thing. But his mother—does he even know she’s not dead?”

“You’re writing a tragedy for him without cause,” I say. “We have no reason to believe he doesn’t know. And he’s not one of us. He’s no spy.”

The Roach bites off the last piece of gristle from the chicken bones,

cracking it between his teeth. He's finished the whole plate of them and, pushing it aside, starts on the pickles. "You made a bargain for me to train him, and I've taken him under my wing. Sleight of hand. Pickpocketing. Little magics. He's good at it."

I think of the coin playing across his long fingers while he slouched in the burnt remains of his rooms. I glare at the Roach.

He only laughs. "Don't look at me like that. 'Twas you who made the bargain."

I barely recall that part, so intent was I on getting Cardan to agree to a year and a day of service. So long as he pledged to me, I could put him on the throne. I would have promised him much more than lessons in spycraft.

But when I think of the night he was shot at, the night he did coin tricks, I can't help recalling him gazing up from my bed, intoxicated and disturbingly intoxicating.

Kiss me until I am sick of it.

"And now he's playacting, isn't he?" the Roach goes on. "Because if he's the true High King of Elfhame, whom we are to follow to the end of days, then we've been a mite disrespectful, running the kingdom for him. But if he is playacting, then he's a spy for sure and better than most of us. Which makes him part of the Shadow Court."

I drink down my coffee in a scalding swallow. "We can't talk about this."

"Not at home we can't," the Roach says with a wink. "Which is why we're here."

I asked him to seduce Nicasia. Yes, I guess I have been a "mite disrespectful" to the High King of Elfhame. And the Roach is right, Cardan didn't behave as though he was too royal for my request. That wasn't his reason for taking offense.

"Fine," I say in defeat. "I'll figure out a way to tell him."

The Roach grins. "The food's good here, right? Sometimes I miss the mortal world. But for good or ill, my work in Elfhame is not yet done."

"Hopefully for good," I say, and take a bite of the shredded potato cake that came with my omelet.

The Roach snorts. He's moved on to his milkshake, the other plates bare and stacked up to one side of him. He lifts his mug in a salute. "To the triumph of goodness, just not before we get ours."

"I want to ask you something," I say, clinking my mug against his. "About the Bomb."

"Leave her out of this," he says, studying me. "And if you can, leave her out of your schemes against the Undersea. I know you're always sticking your neck out as though you're enamored of the axe, but if there must be a neck on

the chopping block beside you, choose a less comely one."

"Including your own?" I ask.

"Much better," he agrees.

"Because you love her?" I ask.

The Roach frowns at me. "And if I did? Would you lie to me about my chances?"

"No—" I begin, but he cuts me off.

"I love a good lie," he says, standing and setting down little stacks of silver coins on the table. "I love a good liar even better, which is to your benefit. But some lies are not worth the telling."

I bite my lip, unable to say anything else without spilling the Bomb's secrets.

After the diner, we part ways, both of us with ragwort in our pockets. I watch him go, thinking of his claim on Cardan. I had been trying so hard not to think of him as the rightful High King of Elfhame that I had entirely missed asking myself whether *he* considered himself to be High King. And, if he didn't, whether that meant he thought of himself as one of my spies instead.

I make my way to my sister's apartment. Though I've donned mortal clothing to walk around the mall and tried to behave in such a way as would be above suspicion, it turns out that arriving in Maine in a doublet and riding boots draws a few stares but no fear that I have come from another world.

Perhaps I am part of a medieval festival, a girl suggests as I pass her. She went to one a few years ago and enjoyed the joust very much. She had a large turkey leg and tried mead for the first time.

"It goes to your head," I tell her. She agrees.

An elderly man with a newspaper remarks that I must be doing Shakespeare in the park. A few louts on some steps call out to me that Halloween is in October.

The Folk doubtlessly learned this lesson long ago. They do not need to deceive humans. Humans will deceive themselves.

It is with this fresh in my mind that I cross a lawn full of dandelions, go up the steps to my sister's door, and knock.

Heather opens it. Her pink hair is freshly dyed for the wedding. For a moment, she looks taken aback—probably by my outfit—and then smiles, opening the door wide. "Hi! Thanks for being willing to drive. Everything's

mostly packed. Is your car big enough?”

“Definitely,” I lie, looking around the kitchen for Vivi with a kind of desperation. How is my big sister thinking this is going to go if she hasn’t told Heather *anything*? If she believes I have a *car* instead of *ragwort stalks*.

“Jude!” Oak yells, hopping down from his seat at the table. He throws his arms around me. “Can we go? Are we going? I made everyone presents at school.”

“Let’s see what Vivi says,” I tell him, and give him a squeeze. He’s more solid than I remembered. Even his horns seem slightly longer, although he can’t have grown that much in just a few months, can he?

Heather throws a switch, and the coffeepot starts chugging away. Oak climbs onto a chair and pours candy-colored cereal into a bowl and begins eating it dry.

I sidle past and head into the next room. There’s Heather’s desk, piled with sketches and markers and paints. Prints of her work are taped to the wall above.

Besides making comics, Heather works part time at a copy shop to help cover bills. She believes Vivi has a job, too, which may or may not be a fiction. There are jobs for the Folk in the mortal world, just not the sort of jobs one tells one’s human girlfriend about.

Especially if one has conveniently never mentioned one isn’t human.

Their furniture is a collection of stuff from garage sales, salvage places, and the side of the road. Covering the walls are old plates with funny, big-eyed animals; cross-stitches with ominous phrases; and Heather’s collection of disco memorabilia, more of her art and Oak’s crayon drawings.

In one, Vivi and Heather and Oak are together, rendered as he sees them—Heather’s brown skin and pink hair, Vivi’s pale skin and cat eyes, Oak’s horns. I bet Heather thinks it’s adorable, how Oak made himself and Vivi into monsters. I bet she thinks it’s a sign of his creativity.

This is going to suck. I am prepared for Heather to yell at my sister—Vivi more than deserves it. But I don’t want Heather to hurt Oak’s feelings.

I find Vivi in her bedroom, still packing. It is small by comparison to the rooms we grew up in, and much less tidy than the rest of the apartments. Her clothes are everywhere. Scarves are draped over the headboard, bangles threaded on the pole of the footboard, shoes peeking out from underneath the bed.

I sit down on the mattress. “Where does Heather think she’s going today?”

Vivi gives me a big grin. “You got my message—looks like it’s possible to enchant birds to do useful things after all.”

“You don’t need me,” I remind her. “You are perfectly capable of making

all the ragwort horses you could ever need—something I can't do."

"Heather believes we are attending the wedding of my sister Taryn, which we are, to an island off the coast of Maine, which we also are. See? Not a single lie was told."

I begin to understand why I was roped in. "And when she wanted to drive, you said your sister would come pick you up."

"Well, she assumed there would be a ferry, and I could hardly agree or disagree with that," Vivi says with the breezy honesty that I've always liked and also been exasperated with.

"And now you're going to have to tell the truthier truth," I say. "Or—I have a proposal. Don't. Keep putting it off. Don't come to the wedding."

"Madoc said you'd say that," she tells me, frowning.

"It's too dangerous—for complicated reasons I know you don't care about," I say. "The Queen of the Undersea wants her daughter to marry Cardan, and she's working with Balekin, who has his own agenda. She's probably playing him, but since she's better at being worse than him, that's not good."

"You're right," Vivi says. "I don't care. Politics are boring."

"Oak is in danger," I say. "Madoc wants to use him as bait."

"There's always danger," Vivi says, throwing a pair of boots on top of some crumpled dresses. "Faerie is one big mousetrap of danger. But if I let that keep us away, how could I look my stalwart father in the face?

"Not to mention my stalwart sister, who is going to keep us safe while father schemes his schemes," Vivi continues. "At least, according to him."

I groan. Just like him to cast me in a role I can't deny, but which serves his purpose. And just like her to ignore me and believe that she knows best.

Someone you trust has already betrayed you.

I have trusted Vivi more than anyone else. I have trusted her with Oak, with the truth, with my plan. I have trusted her because she is my older sister, because she doesn't care about Faerie. But it occurs to me that if she betrayed me, I would be undone.

I wish she wouldn't keep reminding me she was talking to Madoc. "And you trust Dad? That's a change."

"He's not good at a lot of things, but he knows about scheming," Vivi says, which is not that reassuring. "Come on. Tell me about Taryn. Is she actually excited?"

How do I even answer? "Locke got himself made Master of Revels. She's not exactly pleased about his new title or behavior. I think half the reason he likes to screw around is to get under her skin."

"This is not boring," Vivi says. "Go on."

Heather comes into the room with two cups of coffee. We stop talking as she passes one to me and one to Vivi. “I didn’t know how you took it,” she says. “So I made it like Vee’s.”

I take a sip. It’s very sweet. I’ve already had plenty of coffee this morning, but I drink some more anyway.

Black as the eyes of the High King of Elfhame.

Heather leans against the door. “You done packing?”

“Almost.” Vivi eyes her suitcase and then throws in a pair of rain boots. Then she looks around the room, as though she’s wondering what other stuff she can cram in.

Heather frowns. “You’re bringing all that for a week?”

“It’s just the top layer that’s clothes,” Vivi says. “Underneath, it’s mostly stuff for Taryn that’s hard to get on the…*island*.”

“Do you think what I’m planning on wearing will be okay?” I can understand why Heather is worried, since she’s never met my family. She believes our dad is strict. She has no idea.

“Sure,” Vivi says, and then looks at me. “It’s a hot silver dress.”

“Wear anything you want. Really,” I tell Heather, thinking of how gowns and rags and nakedness are all acceptable in Faerie. She’s about to have much bigger problems.

“Hurry up. We don’t want to get stuck in traffic,” Heather says, and goes out again. In the other room, I hear her talking to Oak, asking him if he wants some milk.

“So,” Vivi says, “You were saying…”

I let out a long sigh and gesture with my coffee cup toward the door, bugging out my eyes.

Vivi shakes her head. “Come on. You won’t be able to tell me any of this once we’re there.”

“You know already,” I say. “Locke is going to make Taryn unhappy. But she doesn’t want to hear that, and she especially doesn’t want to hear it from me.”

“You did once have a sword fight over him,” Vivi points out.

“Exactly,” I say. “I’m not objective. Or I don’t seem objective.”

“You know what I wonder about, though,” she says, closing her suitcase and sitting on it to squish it down. She looks up at me with her cat eyes, twin to Madoc’s. “You’ve manipulated the High King of Faerie into obeying you, but you can’t find a way to manipulate one jerk into keeping our sister happy?”

Not fair, I want to say. Practically the last thing I did before I came here was threaten Locke, ordering him not to cheat on Taryn after they got married

—or else. Still, her words rankle. “It’s not that simple.”

She sighs. “I guess nothing ever is.”

CHAPTER 18

Oak holds my hand, and I carry his small suitcase down the steps toward the empty parking lot.

I look back up at Heather. She's dragging a bag behind her and some bungee cords she says we can use if we have to put one of the suitcases on the roof rack. I haven't told her there isn't even a car.

"So," I say, looking at Vivi.

Vivi smiles, reaching out her hand toward me. I take the ragwort stalks out of my pocket and hand them over.

I can't look at Heather's face. I turn back to Oak. He's picking four-leaf clovers from the grass, finding them effortlessly, making a bouquet.

"What are you doing?" Heather asks, puzzled.

"We're not going to take a car. We're going to fly instead," says Vivi.

"We're going to the airport?"

Vivi laughs. "You'll love this. Steed, rise and bear us where I command."

A choked gasp behind me. Then Heather screams. I turn despite myself.

The ragwort steeds are there in front of the apartment complex—starved-looking yellow ponies with lacy manes and emerald eyes, like sea horses on land, weeds come to snorting, snuffling life. And Heather, hands over her mouth.

"Surprise!" says Vivi, continuing to behave as though this is a small thing. Oak, clearly anticipating this moment, chooses it to rip off his own glamour, revealing his horns.

"See, Heather," he says. "We're magic. Are you surprised?"

She looks at Oak, at the monstrous ragwort ponies, and then sinks down to sit on her suitcase. “Okay,” she says. “This is some kind of bullshit practical joke or something, but one of you is going to tell me what’s going on or I am going to go back inside the house and lock you all out.”

Oak looks crestfallen. He’d really expected her to be delighted. I put my arm around him, rubbing his shoulder. “Come on, sweets,” I say. “Let’s get the stuff loaded up, and they can come after. Mom and Dad are so excited to see you.”

“I miss them,” he tells me. “I miss you, too.”

I kiss him on one soft cheek as I lift him onto the horse’s back. He looks over my shoulder at Heather.

Behind me, I can hear Vivi start to explain. “Faerie is real. Magic is real. See? I’m not human, and neither is my brother. And we’re going to take you away to a magic island for the whole week. Don’t be afraid. We’re not the scary ones.”

I manage to get the bungee cords from Heather’s numb hands while Vivi shows off her pointed ears and cat eyes and tries to explain away never telling her any of it before.

We are definitely the scary ones.

Some hours later, we are in Oriana’s parlor. Heather, still looking bewildered and upset, walks around, staring at the strange art on the walls, the ominous pattern of beetles and thorns in the weave of draperies.

Oak sits on Oriana’s lap, letting her cradle him in her arms as though he is very small again. Her pale fingers fuss with his hair—which she thinks is too short—and he tells her a long, rambling story about school and the way the stars are different in the mortal world and what peanut butter tastes like.

It hurts a little to watch, because Oriana no more gave birth to Oak than to me or Taryn, but she is very clearly Oak’s mother while she has steadfastly refused to be ours.

Vivi pulls presents from her suitcase. Bags of coffee beans, glass earrings in the shape of little leaves, tins of *dulce de leche*.

Heather walks over to me. “This is all real.”

“Really, really real,” I confirm.

“And it’s true that these people are elves, that Vee is an elf, like from a story?” Heather looks around the room again, warily, as though she is

expecting a rainbow-colored unicorn to burst through the plaster and lathe.

"Yup," I say. She seems freaked out, but not actually angry at Vivi, which is something. Maybe the news is too big for anger, at least yet.

Or maybe Heather's honestly pleased. Maybe Vivi was right about the way to tell her, and it was only that the delight took a few minutes to kick in. What do I know about love?

"And this place is…" she stops herself. "Oak is some kind of prince? He's got horns. And Vivi has those eyes."

"Cat eyes like her father," I say. "It's a lot, I'm sure."

"He sounds scary," Heather says. "Your dad. Sorry, I mean Vee's dad. She says he's not really your father."

I flinch, although I am sure Vivi didn't mean it that way. Maybe she didn't even say it that way.

"Because you're human," Heather tries to clarify. "You are human, right?"

I nod, and the relief on her face is clear. She laughs a little.

"It's not easy to be human in Faerie," I tell her. "Come walk with me. I want to tell you some stuff."

She tries to catch Vivi's eye, but Vivi is still sitting on the rug, rooting through her suitcase. I see more trinkets, packages of licorice, hair ribbons, and a large package covered in white paper with a golden bow, stamped with "congratulations" all along its length.

Unsure of what else to do, Heather follows me. Vivi doesn't even seem to notice.

It is strange to be back in the house where I grew up. Tempting to run up the stairs and throw open the doors to my old room, to see if there's any trace of me there. Tempting to go into Madoc's study and go through his papers like the spy that I am.

Instead, I head out onto the lawn and start toward the stables. Heather takes a deep breath of air. Her eyes are drawn to the towers visible above the tree line.

"Did Vee talk to you about rules?" I ask as we walk.

Heather shakes her head, clearly puzzled. "Rules?"

Vivi has come through for me plenty of times when no one else did, so I know she cares. Still, it feels like willful blindness to have overlooked how hard Taryn and I had it as mortals, how careful we had to be, and how careful Heather ought to be while she's here.

"She said I should stick by her," Heather says, probably seeing the frustration on my face and wanting to defend Vivi. "That I shouldn't wander off without one of her family members."

I shake my head. "Not good enough. Listen, the Folk can glamour things

to look different than they do. They can mess with your mind—charm you, persuade you to do things you wouldn't consider normally. And then there's everapple, the fruit of Faerie. If you taste it, all you'll think of is getting more."

I sound like Oriana.

Heather is looking at me in horror and possibly disbelief. I wonder if I went too far. I try again with a slightly calmer tone. "We're at a disadvantage here. The Folk, they're ageless, immortal, and magical. And they're not all fond of humans. So don't let your guard down, don't make any bargains, and keep some specific things on your person at all times—rowan berries and salt."

"Okay," she says.

In the distance, I can see Madoc's two riding toads out on the lawn, being tended by grooms.

"You're taking this really well," I say.

"I have two questions." Something in her voice or her manner makes me realize she is maybe having a harder time than I thought. "One, what are rowan berries? And two, if Faerieland is the way you say, why do you live here?"

I open my mouth, and then shut it. "It's home," I say, finally.

"It doesn't have to be," she says. "If Vee can leave, so can you. Like you said, you're not one of them."

"Come to the kitchens," I tell her, veering back toward the house.

Once there, Heather is transfixed by the enormous cauldron, big enough for both of us to bathe in. She stares at the plucked bodies of partridges, resting on the counter beside dough rolled out for a pie.

I go over to the glass jars of herbs and draw out a few rowan berries. I take out a thick thread for sewing stuffing inside hens, and I use that and a bit of cheesecloth to make her a small knot of them.

"Put this in your pocket or in your bra," I tell her. "Keep it on you while you're here."

"And this will keep me safe?" Heather asks.

"Safer," I say, sewing her up a bag of salt. "Sprinkle this on whatever you eat. Don't forget."

"Thank you." She takes my arm, giving it a quick squeeze. "I mean, this doesn't feel real. I know that must sound ridiculous. I'm standing in front of you. I can smell herbs and blood from those weird little birds. If you stuck me with that needle, it would hurt. But it still doesn't feel real. Even though it makes sense of all Vee's stupid evasions about normal stuff like where she went to high school. But it means the whole world is upside down."

When I've been over there—at the mall, in Heather's apartment—the difference between them and us has seemed so vast that I can't imagine how Heather is managing to bridge it. "Nothing you could say would sound ridiculous to me," I tell her.

Her gaze, as she takes in the stronghold, as she drinks in a breath of late-afternoon air, is full of hopeful interest. I have an uncomfortable memory of a girl with stones in her pockets and am desperately relieved that Heather is willing to accept her world being turned over.

Back in the parlor, Vivi grins at us. "Did Jude give you the grand tour?"

"I made her a charm," I say, my tone making it clear that she should have been the one to do it.

"Good," Vivi says happily, because it's going to take much more than a slightly aggrieved tone to get under her skin when things are going her way. "Oriana tells me you haven't been around much lately. Your feud with dear old Dad sounds pretty serious."

"You know what it cost him," I say.

"Stay for dinner." Oriana rises, pale as a ghost, to look at me with her ruby eyes. "Madoc would like that. I would, too."

"I can't," I tell her, actually feeling regretful about it. "I've dallied here more than I should have, but I will see you all at the wedding."

"Things are always super *dramatic* around here," Vivi tells Heather. "Epic. Everyone acts as though they just stepped out of a murder ballad."

Heather looks at Vivi as though, perhaps, she just stepped out of a ballad, too.

"Oh," Vivi says, reaching into her suitcase again, coming up with another squishy-looking package wrapped with a black bow. "Can you take this to Cardan? It's a 'congratulations on being king' present."

"He's the *High King of Elfhame*," Oriana says. "Whether or not you played together, you cannot call him as you did when you were children."

I stand there stupidly for a long moment, not reaching for the package. I knew Vivi and Cardan were friendly. After all, Vivi's the one who told Taryn about his tail, having seen it while swimming together with one of his sisters.

I just forgot.

"Jude?" Vivi asks.

"I think you better give it to him yourself," I say, and with that, I make my escape from my old house before Madoc returns home and I am overcome with nostalgia.

I pass by the throne room where Cardan sits at one of the low tables, his head bent toward Nicasia's. I cannot see his face, but I can see hers as she throws back her head with laughter, showing the long column of her throat. She looks incandescent with joy, his attention the light in which her beauty shines especially bright.

She *loves* him, I realize uncomfortably. She loves him, and she betrayed him with Locke and is terrified he will never love her again.

His fingers trace their way down her arm to the back of her wrist, and I remember vividly the feeling of those hands on me. My skin heats at the memory, a blush that starts at my throat and keeps going from there.

Kiss me until I am sick of it, he said, and now he has most certainly gorged on my kisses. Now he is most certainly sick of them.

I hate seeing him with Nicasia. I hate the thought of his touching her. I hate that this is my plan, that I have no one to be angry with but myself.

I am an idiot.

Pain makes you strong, Madoc once told me, making me lift a sword again and again. *Get used to the weight.*

I force myself to watch no more. Instead, I meet with Vulciber to coordinate bringing Balekin to the palace for his audience with Cardan.

Then I go down to the Court of Shadows and hear information about courtiers, hear rumors of Madoc's marshaling his forces as though preparing for the war I still hope to avoid. I send two spies to the lower Courts with the largest number of unsworn changelings to see what they can learn. I talk to the Bomb about Grimsen, who has crafted Nicasia a gem-encrusted broach that allows her to summon gauzy wings from her back and fly.

"What do you think he wants?" I ask.

"Praise, flattery," says the Bomb. "Perhaps to find a new patron. Probably he wouldn't mind a kiss."

"Do you think he's interested in Nicasia for Orlagh's sake or her own?" I want to know.

The Bomb shrugs. "He is interested in Nicasia's beauty and Orlagh's power. Grimsen went into exile with the first Alderking; I believe that the next time he swears fealty, he will be very sure of the monarch to whom he swears."

"Or maybe he doesn't want to swear fealty ever again," I say, determining to pay him a visit.

Grimsen chose to live as well as work in the old forge Cardan gave him, though it was overgrown with rosebushes and not in the best repair.

A thin plume of smoke spirals up from the chimney as I approach. I rap three times on the door and wait.

A few moments later, he opens the door, letting out a blast of heat hot enough for me to take a step back.

"I know you," he says.

"Queen of Mirth," I acknowledge, getting it out of the way.

He laughs, shaking his head. "I knew your mortal father. He made a knife for me once, traveled all the way to Fairfold to ask me what I thought of it."

"And what *did* you think?" I wonder if this was before Justin arrived at Elfhame, before my mother.

"He had real talent. I told him that if he practiced for fifty years he might make the greatest blade ever made by a mortal man. I told him that if he practiced for a *hundred* years, he might craft one of the finest blades made by anyone. None of it satisfied him. Then I told him that I would give him one of my secrets: he could learn the practice of a hundred years in a single day, if only he would make a bargain with me. If only he would part with something he didn't want to lose."

"And did he make the bargain?" I ask.

He appears delighted. "Oh, wouldn't you like to know? Come in."

With a sigh, I do. The heat is nearly unbearable, and the stink of metal overwhelms my senses. In the dim room, what I see most is fire. My hand goes to the knife in my sleeve.

Thankfully, we move through the forge and into the living quarters of the house. It is untidy, all the surfaces littered with beautiful things—gems, jewelry, blades, and other ornaments. He pulls out a small wooden chair for me, and then sits on a low bench.

He has a worn, leathery face, and his silvery hair stands on end, as though he has been tugging on it as he worked. Today he is not clad in jeweled jackets; he wears a worn leather smock over a gray shirt smeared with ash. Seven heavy gold hoops hang from his large, pointed ears.

"What brings you to my forge?" he asks.

"I was hoping to find a gift for my sister. She is getting married in just a few days."

"Something special then," he says.

"I know you are a legendary smith," I tell him. "So I thought it was possible you no longer sold your wares."

"No matter my fame, I am still a tradesman," he says, covering his heart. He looks pleased to be flattered. "But it's true that I no longer deal in coins,

only in barter.”

I should have figured there was some trick. Still, I blink at him, all innocence. “What can I give you that you don’t already have?”

“Let’s find out,” he says. “Tell me about your sister. Is this a love match?”

“It must be,” I say, thinking that over. “Since there’s no practical value in it.”

His eyebrows rise. “Yes, I see. And does your sister resemble you?”

“We’re twins,” I say.

“Blue stones, then, for your coloring,” he says. “Perhaps a necklace of tears to weep so that she won’t have to? A pin of teeth that to bite annoying husbands? No.” He continues to walk through the small space. He lifts a ring. “To bring on a child?” And then, seeing my face, lifts a pair of earrings, one in the shape of a crescent moon and the other in the shape of a star. “Ah, yes. Here. This is what you want.”

“What do they do?” I ask.

He laughs. “They are beautiful, isn’t that enough?”

I give him a skeptical look. “It would be enough, considering how exquisite they are, but I bet it isn’t all.”

He enjoys that. “Clever girl. They are not only beautiful, but they add to beauty. They make someone more lovely than they were, painfully lovely. Her husband will not leave her side for quite some time.”

The look on his face is a challenge. He believes I am too vain to give such a gift to my sister.

How well he knows the selfish human heart. Taryn will be a beautiful bride. How much more do I, her twin, want to put myself in her shadow? How lovely can I bear her to be?

And yet, what better gift for a human girl wedded to the beauty of the Folk?

“What would you take for them?” I ask.

“Oh, any number of little things. A year of your life. The luster of your hair. The sound of your laugh.”

“My laugh is not such a sweet sound as all that.”

“Not sweet, but I bet it’s rare,” he says, and I wonder at his knowing that.

“What about my tears?” I ask. “You could make another necklace.”

He looks at me, as though evaluating how often I weep. “I will take a single tear,” he says finally. “And you will take an offer to the High King for me.”

“What kind of offer?” I counter.

“It is known that the Undersea has threatened the land. Tell your king that if he declares war, I will make him armor of ice to shatter every blade that

strikes it and which will make his heart too cold to feel pity. Tell him I will make him three swords that, when used in the same battle, will fight with the might of thirty soldiers."

I am shocked. "I will tell him. But why would you want that?"

He grimaces, taking out a cloth to polish the earrings. "I have a reputation to rebuild, my lady, and not just as a maker of trinkets. Once, kings and queens came to me as supplicants. Once, I forged crowns and blades to change the world. It stands within the High King's power to restore my fame, and it stands within my power to add to his power."

"What happens if he likes the world the way it is?" I ask. "Unchanged."

He gives a little laugh. "Then I will make you a little glass in which to suspend time."

The tear is taken out of the corner of my eye with a long siphon. Then I leave, holding Taryn's earrings and more questions.

Back in my own rooms, I hold the jewels to my own ears. Even in the mirror, they make my eyes look liquid and luminous. My mouth seems redder, my skin glows as though I have just risen from a bath.

I wrap them up before I think better of it.

CHAPTER 19

I spend the rest of the night in the Court of Shadows, preparing plans to keep Oak safe. Winged guards who can sweep him up into the air if he is lured by the delights of the waves he once played in. A spy disguised as a nanny, to follow him and dote on him and sample anything before he can taste it. Archers in the trees, the tips of their arrows trained on anyone who comes too close to my brother.

As I am trying to anticipate what Orlagh might do and how to know as soon as it happens, there's a knock on my door.

"Yes?" I call, and Cardan walks in.

I jerk to my feet in surprise. I don't expect him to be here, but he is, dressed in disarranged finery. His lips are slightly swollen, his hair mussed. He looks as though he came straight from a bed and not his own.

He tosses a scroll down on my desk.

"Well?" I ask, my voice coming out as cold as I could ever wish.

"You were right," he says, and it sounds like an accusation.

"What?" I ask.

He leans against the doorjamb. "Nicasia gave up her secrets. All it took was some kindness and a few kisses."

Our eyes meet. If I look away, then he will know I am embarrassed, but I fear he can tell anyway. My cheeks go hot. I wonder if I will ever be able to look at him again without remembering what it was like to touch him.

"Orlagh will act during the wedding of Locke and your sister."

I sit back down in my chair, looking at all the notes in front of me. "You're

sure?”

He nods. “Nicasia said that as mortal power grows, land and sea ought to be united. And that they would be, either in the way she hoped or the way I should fear.”

“Ominous,” I say.

“It seems I have a singular taste for women who threaten me.”

I cannot think of what to say to that, so instead I tell him about Grimsen’s offer to forge him armor and swords to carry him to victory. “So long as you’re willing to fight the Undersea.”

“He wants me to have a war to restore him to his former glory?” Cardan asks.

“Pretty much,” I say.

“Now that’s ambition,” Cardan says. “There might be only a floodplain and several pine trees still on fire remaining, but the four Folk huddling together in a damp cave would have heard the name Grimsen. One must admire the focus. I don’t suppose you told him that declaring war or not was your call, not mine.”

If he’s the true High King of Elfhame, whom we are to follow to the end of days, then we’ve been a mite disrespectful, running the kingdom for him. And if he’s playacting, then he’s a spy for sure and better than most of us.

“Of course not,” I say.

For a moment, there is silence between us.

He takes a step toward me. “The other night—”

I cut him off. “I did it for the same reason that you did. To get it out of my system.”

“And is it?” he asks. “Out of your system?”

I look him in the face and lie. “Yes.”

If he touches me, if he even takes another step toward me, my deceit will be exposed. I don’t think I can keep the longing off my face. Instead, to my relief, he gives a thin-lipped nod and departs.

From the next room, I hear the Roach call out to Cardan, to offer to teach him the trick of levitating a playing card. I hear Cardan laugh.

It occurs to me that maybe desire isn’t something overindulging helps. Maybe it is not unlike mithridatism; maybe I took a killing dose when I should have been poisoning myself slowly, one kiss at a time.

I am unsurprised to find Madoc in his strategy room in the palace, but he is surprised by me, unused to my slyfooting.

"Father," I say.

"I used to think I wanted you to call me that," he says. "But it turns out that when you do, good things seldom come after."

"Not at all," I say. "I came to tell you that you were right. I hate the idea of Oak's being in danger, but if we can engineer when Undersea's strike comes, that's safer for Oak."

"You've been planning out the guarding of him while he's here." He grins, showing his sharp teeth. "Hard to cover every eventuality."

"Impossible." I sigh, walking deeper into the room. "So I'm on board. Let me help misdirect the Undersea. I have resources." He's been a general a long time. He planned Dain's murder and got away with it. He's better at this than I am.

"What if you only want to thwart me?" he asks. "You can hardly expect me to take it on faith that now you are in earnest."

Although he has every reason to, Madoc's distrust stings. I wonder what it would have been like if he had shared his plans for putting Oak on the throne before I was witness to the coronation bloodbath. Had he trusted me to be a part of his scheme, I wonder if I would have waved away my doubts. I don't like to think of that being possible, but I fear it might be.

"I wouldn't put my brother at risk," I say, half in response to him, half in response to my own fears.

"Oh?" he asks. "Not even to save him from my clutches?"

I guess I deserve that. "You said you wanted me to come back to your side. Here's your chance to show me what it would be like to work with you. Persuade me."

While I control the throne, we can't ever truly be on the same side, but maybe we could work together. Maybe he can channel his ambition into beating the Undersea and forget about the throne, at least until Oak comes of age. By then, at least, things will be different.

He indicates the table with a map of the islands and his carved figurines. "Orlagh has a week to strike, unless she means to set a trap back in the mortal world in Oak's absence. You have guards on Vivienne's apartment—ones you've engaged outside the military and who do not look like knights. Clever. But nothing and no one is infallible. I think the place most advantageous for us to tempt them into striking—"

"The Undersea is going to make its move during Taryn's wedding."

"What?" He gives me a narrow-eyed evaluation. "How do you know that?"

“Nicasia,” I say. “And I think I can narrow things more if we work fast. I have a way to get information to Balekin, information that he will believe.”

Madoc’s eyebrows rise.

I nod. “A prisoner. I’ve already sent information through her successfully.”

He turns away from me to pour himself a finger of some dark liquor and flop back into the leather chair. “These are the resources you mentioned?”

“I do not come to you empty-handed,” I say. “Aren’t you at least a little pleased you decided to trust me?”

“I could claim that it was *you* who finally decided to trust *me*. Now it remains to be seen how well we will work together. There are many more projects on which we could collaborate.”

Like taking the throne. “One misadventure at a time,” I caution him.

“Does he know?” Madoc asks, grinning a slightly terrifying yet paternal fashion. “Does our High King have any idea how good you are at running his kingdom for him?”

“Keep hoping he doesn’t,” I say, trying for a breezy confidence that I don’t feel when it comes to anything to do with Cardan or our arrangement.

Madoc laughs. “Oh, I shall, daughter, much as I hope you will realize how much better it would be if you were to be running it for your own family.”

Cardan’s audience with Balekin takes place the next day. My spies tell me he spent the night alone—no riotous parties, no drunken revels, no contests for lyres. I do not know how to interpret that.

Balekin is led into the throne room in chains, but he walks with his head up, in clothing far too fine for the Tower. He flaunts his ability to obtain luxuries, flaunts his arrogance, as though Cardan is to be awed by this instead of annoyed.

For his part, Cardan looks especially formidable. He wears a coat of mossy velvet, embroidered all over in bright gold. The earring given to him by Grimsen dangles from his lobe, catching the light as he turns his head. No revelers are here today, but the room is not empty. Randalin and Nihuar stand together near the dais to one side, near three guards. I am on the other, standing near a patch of shadows. Servants linger nearby, ready to pour wine or play harps, as suits the High King’s pleasure.

I arranged with Vulciber for Lady Asha to get a note just as Balekin was being brought up the stairs and out of the Tower for this audience.

The note read:

> ***I have thought over your requests and want to negotiate. There's a way to get you off the island, immediately after my sister's wedding. For his safety, my little brother is being brought back by boat because flying made him ill. You can go, too, without the High King being the wiser, as the journey is, of necessity, secret. If you agree that this will suffice, send me word back and we will meet again to discuss my past and your future.—J***

There is some chance that she will say nothing to Balekin when he returns to his cell, but since she has passed on information to him already and since he doubtlessly saw her get the note, I believe he will not stand for hearing there was nothing to it, especially as, being a faerie, she must engage in evasions rather than outright lies.

"Little brother," Balekin says without waiting to be acknowledged. He wears the chained cuffs on his wrists as though they are bracelets, as though they add to his status instead of marking him as a prisoner.

"You requested an audience with the crown," Cardan says.

"No, brother, it was you I wanted to speak with, not the ornament on your head." Balekin's sly disrespect makes me wonder why he wanted this audience in the first place.

I think of Madoc and how around him, I am perpetually a child. It's no small thing to pass judgment on the person who raised you, no matter what else they have done. This confrontation is less about this moment and more about the vast sweep of their past, the warp and weft of old resentments and alliances between them.

"What is it you want?" Cardan asks. His voice remains mild but empty of the bored authority he usually wields.

"What does any prisoner want?" Balekin says. "Let me out of the Tower. If you mean to succeed, you need my help."

"If you've been trying to see me only to say that, your efforts have been to no purpose. No, I will not release you. No, I do not need you." Cardan sounds certain.

Balekin smiles. "You've locked me away for fear of me. After all, you hated Eldred more than I did. You despised Dain. How can you punish me for deaths you do not regret?"

Cardan looks at Balekin in disbelief, half-rising from the throne. His fists are balled. His face is that of a person who has forgotten where he is. "What of Elowyn? What of Caelia and Rhyia? If all I cared for were my own feelings, their deaths would be enough reason for me to revenge myself on

you. They were our sisters, and they would have been better rulers than either you or I.”

I thought Balekin would back down at that, but he doesn’t. Instead, an insidious little smile grows on his mouth. “Did they intercede for you? Did any one of your dear sisters take you in? How can you think they cared for you when they wouldn’t go against father for your sake?”

For a moment, I think Cardan is going to strike him. My hand goes to the hilt of my own sword. I will get in front of him. I will fight Balekin. It would be my pleasure to fight Balekin.

Instead, Cardan slumps back down onto the throne. The fury leaves his face, and he speaks as though Balekin’s last words went unheard. “But you are locked away neither because I fear you nor for revenge. I did not indulge myself with your punishment. You are in the Tower because it is just.”

“You can’t do this alone,” Balekin says, looking around the room. “You’ve never cared for work, never cared to flatter diplomats or follow duty instead of pleasure. Give me the difficult tasks, instead of giving them some mortal girl to whom you feel indebted and who will only fail you.”

The eyes of Nihuar and Randalin and a few of the guards go to me, but Cardan watches his brother. After a long moment, he speaks. “You would be my regent, though I am of age? You come before me not as a penitent, but as before a stray dog you would call to heel.”

Finally, Balekin looks discomfited. “Although I have sometimes been harsh with you, it was because I sought to make you better. Do you think that you can be indolent and self-indulgent and yet succeed here, as a ruler? Without me, you would be nothing. Without me, you will be nothing.”

The idea that Balekin can say those words without believing them a lie is shocking.

Cardan, for his part, wears a small smile, and when he speaks, his voice is light. “You threaten me, you praise yourself. You give away your desires. Even were I considering your offer, after that little speech, I would be sure you were no diplomat.”

Balekin takes a furious step toward the throne, and guards closes the space between them. I can see Balekin’s physical urge to punish Cardan.

“You are playing at being king,” Balekin says. “And if you don’t know it, then you are the only one. Send me back to prison, lose my help, and lose the kingdom.”

“That,” Cardan says. “The second option, the one that doesn’t involve you. That’s the one I choose.” He turns to Vulciber. “This audience is over.”

As Vulciber and the other guards move to escort Balekin back to the Tower of Forgetting, his gaze goes to me. And in his eyes, I see a well of hate

so deep that I fear that if we’re not careful, all of Elfhame may drown in it.

Two nights before my sister’s wedding, I stand in front of the long mirror in my rooms and slowly draw Nightfell. I move through the stances, the ones Madoc taught me, the ones I learned in the Court of Shadows.

Then I raise my blade, presenting it to my opponent. I salute her in the mirror.

Back and forth, I dance across the floor, fighting her. I strike and parry, parry and strike. I feign. I duck. I watch sweat bead on her forehead. I battle on until perspiration stains her shirt, until she’s shaking with exhaustion.

It’s still not enough.

I can never beat her.

CHAPTER 20

The trap for Orlagh is set. I spend the day with Madoc going over the particulars. We created three specific times and places where the Undersea could strike with some confidence:

The boat itself, carrying a decoy, is obvious. It requires a hob to pretend to be Oak, huddling in a cloak, and the boat itself to be enchanted to fly.

Before that, there is a moment during Taryn's reception when Oak is to wander off on his own into the maze. A section of the greenery will be replaced with treefolk, who will remain unseen until they need to strike.

And even before that, upon arrival at Locke's estate for the wedding, Oak will seem to step out of the carriage onto an open patch of land visible from the ocean. We will employ the decoy there as well. I will wait with the real Oak in the carriage while the rest of the family goes out and—hopefully—the sea strikes. Then the carriage will pull around, and we will climb straight through a window. In this case, the trees near the shore will be full of sprites, ready to spot the denizens of the Undersea, and a net has been buried under the sand to trap them.

Three chances to catch the Undersea in an attempt to harm Oak. Three chances to make them regret trying.

We do not neglect protecting Cardan, either. His personal guard is on high alert. He has his own coterie of archers who will follow his every move. And, of course, our spies.

Taryn wants to spend her last night before the wedding with her sisters, so I pack up a dress and the earrings in a rucksack and tie it to the back of the

same horse I once took to Insweal. I strap Nightfell across the back of the saddle. Then I ride to Madoc's estate.

The night is beautiful. A breeze runs through the trees, fragrant with the scent of pine needles and everapple. Distantly, I hear hoofbeats. Foxes make their odd screaming calls to one another. The trill of flute music comes from somewhere far off, along with the sound of mermaids singing their high-pitched, wordless songs out on the rocks.

Then, abruptly, the hoofbeats are no longer distant. Through the woods come riders. Seven of them, mounted on the backs of pearl-eyed, emaciated horses. Their faces are covered, their armor splashed with white paint. I can hear their laughter as they split apart to come at me from different angles. For a moment, I think there must be some mistake.

One of them draws an axe, which shines under the light of the first-quarter moon, putting a chill into my blood. No, there is no mistake. They have come to kill me.

My experience fighting on horseback is limited. I thought I would be a knight in Elfhame, defending some royal's body and honor, not riding into battles like Madoc.

Now, as they close in on me, I think about who was aware of that particular vulnerability. Certainly Madoc knew. Perhaps this is his method of repaying me for my betrayal. Perhaps trusting me was a ruse. After all, he knew I was headed to his stronghold tonight. And we've spent the afternoon planning traps just like this.

Regretfully, I think of the Roach's warning: *Next time, take a member of the royal guard. Take one of us. Take a cloud of sprites or a drunken spriggan. Just take someone*.

But it's just me. Alone.

I urge my horse to greater speed. If I can make it through the woods and get close enough to the house, then I'll be safe. There are guards there, and whether or not Madoc put the riders up to this, he would never let a guest, not to mention his ward, be slain on his own lands.

That wouldn't be playing by the rules of courtesy.

All I have to do is make it.

The hoofbeats pound behind me as we streak through the woods. I look back, wind in my face, hair blowing into my mouth. They're riding far apart, trying to get enough ahead of me to herd me away from Madoc's, toward the coast, where there's nowhere to hide.

Closer and closer, they come. I can hear them calling to one another, but the words are lost in the wind. My horse is fast, but theirs flow like water through the night. As I look back, I see one of them has drawn a bow with

black-fletched arrows.

I wheel my mount to one side, only to find another rider there, cutting off my escape.

They are armored, with weapons to hand. I have only a few knives on me and Nightfell back with my saddlebags, along with a small crossbow in the pack itself. I walked through these woods hundreds of times in my childhood; I never thought I would need to be armored for battle here.

An arrow whizzes past me as another rider closes, brandishing a blade.

There is no way I will outrun them.

I stand up in the stirrups, a trick I am not sure is going to work, and then grab hold of the next sturdy branch I pass. One of the white-eyed steeds bares its teeth and bites down on the flank of my own mount. My poor animal whinnies and bucks. In the moonlight, I think I make out amber eyes as a rider's long sword swings through the air.

I vault up, hauling myself onto the branch. For a moment, I just hold on to it, breathing hard, as the riders pass beneath me. They wheel around. One takes a swig from a flask, leaving a golden stain on his lips.

"Little cat up in a tree," another calls. "Come down for the foxes!"

I push myself to my feet, mindful of the Ghost's lessons as I run along the branch. Three riders circle below me. There's a flash in the air as the axe flies in my direction. I duck, trying not to slip. The weapon whirls past me, biting into the trunk of the tree.

"Nice try," I call, trying to sound anything but terrified. I've got to get away from them. I've got to get higher. But then what? I can't fight seven of them. Even if I wanted to try, my sword is still tied to my horse. All I have are a few knives.

"Come down, human girl," says one with silvery eyes.

"We heard of your viciousness. We heard of your ferocity," says another in a deep, melodious voice that might be female. "Do not disappoint us."

A third notches another black-tipped arrow.

"If I am to be a cat, let me give you a scratch," I say, pulling two leaf-shaped knives from my sides and sending them in two shining arcs toward the riders.

One misses, and the other hits armor, but I hope it's enough of a distraction for me to tug the axe from the wood. Then, I move. I jump from branch to branch as arrows fly all around, grateful for everything the Ghost ever taught me.

Then an arrow takes me in the thigh.

I am unable to bite back a cry of pain. I start moving again, pushing through the shock, but my speed is gone. The next arrow hits so near my side

that it’s only luck that saves me.

They can see too well, even in the dark. They can see so much better than I can.

The riders have all the advantages. Up in the trees, so long as I can’t hide, all I am presenting is a slightly tricky target, but the fun kind of tricky. And the more tired I get, the more I bleed, the more I hurt, the slower I will become. If I don’t change the game, I am going to lose.

I have to even the odds. I have to do something they won’t expect. If I can’t see, then I must trust my other senses.

Sucking in a deep breath, ignoring the pain in my leg and the arrow still sticking out of it, axe in hand, I take a running jump off the branch with a howl.

The riders try to turn their horses to get away from me.

I catch a rider in the chest with the axe. The point of it folds his armor inward. Which is quite a trick—or would have been if I didn’t lose my balance a moment later. The weapon comes out of my hand as I fall. I hit the dirt hard, knocking the breath out of me. Immediately, I roll to avoid hoof strikes. My head is ringing, and my leg feels as though it’s on fire when I push myself to my feet. I cracked the spine of the arrow sticking out of me, but I drove the point deeper.

The rider I struck is hanging in his saddle, his body limp, and his mouth bubbling red.

Another rider wheels to the side while a third comes straight on. I draw a knife as the archer coming toward me attempts to switch back to his sword.

Six to one is much better odds, especially when four of the riders are hanging back, as though they hadn’t considered that they could get hurt, too.

“Ferocious enough for you?” I shout at them.

The silver-eyed rider comes at me, and I throw my knife. It misses him but hits the horse in the flank. The animal rears up. But as he tries to get his mount back under control, another barrels toward me. I grab for the axe, take a deep breath, and focus.

The skeletal horse watches me with its pupil-less white eyes. It looks hungry.

If I die here in the woods because I wasn’t better prepared, because I was too distracted to bother to strap on my own stupid sword, I will be absolutely furious with myself.

I brace as another rider bears down on me, but I am not sure I can withstand the charge. Frantically, I try to come up with another option.

When the horse is close, I drop to the ground, fighting every instinct for survival, every urge to run from the huge animal. It rushes over me, and I lift

the axe and chop upward. Blood spatters my face.

The creature runs a little farther, and then drops with a vicious keening sound, trapping its rider's leg underneath its bulk.

I push to my feet, wiping my face, just in time to see the silver-eyed knight preparing to charge. I grin at him, lifting the bloody axe.

The amber-eyed rider heads toward his fallen comrade, calling for the others. The silver-eyed knight wheels around at the sound, heading toward his companions. The trapped rider struggles as I watch the other two knights pulling him free and up onto one of the other horses. Then the six wheel away through the night, no more laughter following them.

I wait, afraid they might double back, afraid that something worse is about to leap from the shadows. Minutes slip by. The loudest sound is my ragged breath and the roaring of blood in my ears.

Shakily, painfully, I walk on through the woods, only to find my own steed lying in the grass, being devoured by the dead rider's horse. I wave my axe, and it runs away. Nothing makes my poor horse any less dead, though.

My pack is gone from her back. It must have fallen off during the ride, taking my clothing and crossbow with it. My knives are gone, too, littering the forest after I threw them, probably lost in the brush. At least Nightfell is still here, tied to the saddle. I unstrap my father's sword with cramping fingers.

Using it as a cane, I manage to drag myself the rest of the way to Madoc's stronghold and wash off the blood in the pump outside.

Inside, I find Oriana sitting near a window, sewing on an embroidery hoop. She looks at me with her pink eyes and does not bother to smile, as a human might, to put me at ease. "Taryn is upstairs with Vivi and her lover. Oak sleeps and Madoc schemes." She takes in my appearance. "Did you fall in a lake?"

I nod. "Stupid, right?"

She takes another stitch. I head for the stairs, and she speaks again before my foot can hit the first step.

"Would it be so terrible for Oak to stay with me in Faerie?" she asks. There is a long pause, and then she whispers. "I do not wish to lose his love."

I hate that I have to say what she already knows. "Here, there would be no end to courtiers pouring poison in his ear, whispers of the king he would be if only Cardan was out of the way—and that, in turn, might make those loyal to Cardan desirous of getting Oak out of the way. And that's not even thinking about the biggest threats. So long as Balekin lives, Oak's safest far from Faerie. Plus there's Orlagh."

She nods, expression bleak, and turns back to the window.

Maybe she just needs someone else to be the villain, someone to be responsible for keeping them apart. Good luck for her that I am someone she already doesn't much like.

Still, I remember what it was like to miss where I grew up, miss the people who raised me.

"You'll never lose his love," I say, my voice coming out as quietly as hers did. I know she can hear me, but still she doesn't turn.

With that, I go up the stairs, leg aching. I am at the landing when Madoc comes out of his office and looks up at me. He sniffs the air. I wonder if he smells the blood still running down my leg, if he smells dirt and sweat and cold well water.

A chill goes to my bones.

I go into my old room and shut the door. I reach beneath my headboard and am grateful to find that one of my knives is still there, sheathed and a little dusty. I leave it where it was, feeling a little safer.

I limp over to my old tub, bite the inside of my cheek against the pain, and sit down on the edge. Then I slice my pants and inspect what remains of the arrow imbedded in my leg. The cracked shaft is willow, stained with ash. What I can see of the arrowhead is made of jagged antler.

My hands start to shake, and I realize how fast my heart is beating, how fuzzy my head feels.

Arrow wounds are bad, because every time you move, the wound worsens. Your body can't heal with a sharp bit cutting up tissue, and the longer it's there, the harder it is to get out.

Taking a deep breath, I slide my finger down to the arrowhead and press on it lightly. It hurts enough that I gasp and go light-headed for a moment, but it doesn't seem lodged in bone.

I brace myself, take the knife, and cut about an inch down the skin of my leg. It's excruciating, and I am breathing in shallow huffs by the time I work my fingers into the skin and pull the arrowhead free. There's a lot of blood, a scary amount. I press my hand against it, trying to stop the flow.

For a while, I am too dizzy to do anything but sit there.

"Jude?" It's Vivi, opening the door. She takes a look at me, and then at the tub. Her cat eyes widen.

I shake my head. "Don't tell anyone."

"You're bleeding," she says.

"Get me…" I start and then stop, realizing that I need to stitch up the wound, that I didn't think of that. Maybe I'm not as okay as I thought I was. Shock doesn't always hit right away. "I need a needle and thread—not thin stuff, embroidery floss. And a cloth to keep putting pressure on the wound."

She frowns at the knife in my hand, the freshness of the wound. “Did you do that to yourself?”

That snaps me out of my daze for a moment. “Yes, I shot *myself* with an arrow.”

“Okay, okay.” She hands me a shirt from the bed and then goes out of the room. I press the fabric against my wound, hoping to slow the bleeding.

When she gets back, she’s holding white thread and a needle. That thread is not going to be white for long.

“Okay,” I say, trying to concentrate. “You want to hold or sew?”

“Hold,” she says, looking at me as though she wished there was a third option. “Don’t you think I should get Taryn?”

“The night before her wedding? Absolutely not.” I try to thread the needle, but my hands are shaking badly enough that it’s difficult. “Okay, now push the sides of the wound together.”

Vivi kneels down and does, making a face. I gasp and try not to pass out. Just a few more minutes and I can sit down and relax, I promise myself. Just a few more minutes and it will be like this never happened.

I stitch. It hurts. It hurts and hurts and hurts. After I’m done, I wash the leg with more water and rip off the cleanest section of the shirt to wrap around it.

She comes closer. “Can you stand?”

“In a minute.” I shake my head.

“What about Madoc?” she asks. “We could tell—”

“No one,” I say, and, gripping the edge of the tub, kick my leg over, biting back a scream.

Vivi turns on the taps, and water splashes out, washing away the blood. “Your clothes are soaked,” she says, frowning.

“Hand me a dress from over there,” I say. “Look for something sack-like.”

I force myself to limp over to a chair and sink into it. Then I pull off my jacket and the shirt underneath it. Naked to my waist, I can’t go any further without pain stopping me.

Vivi brings over a dress—one so old that Taryn didn’t bother to bring it to me—and bunches it up so she can guide it over my head, then guides my hands through the arm holes as though I were a child. Gently, she takes off my boots and the remains of my pants.

“You could lie down,” she says. “Rest. Heather and I can distract Taryn.”

“I am going to be fine,” I say.

“You don’t have to do anything else, is all I’m saying.” Vivi looks as though she’s reconsidering my warnings about coming here. “Who did this?”

“Seven riders—maybe knights. But who was actually behind the attack? I don’t know.”

Vivi gives a long sigh. “Jude, come back to the human world with me. This doesn’t have to be normal. This isn’t normal.”

I get up out of the chair. I would rather walk on the wounded leg than listen to more of this.

“What would have happened if I hadn’t come in here?” she demands.

Now that I am up, I have to keep moving or lose momentum. I head for the door. “I don’t know,” I say. “But I do know this. Danger can find me in the mortal world, too. My being *here* lets me make sure you and Oak have guards watching you *there*. Look, I get that you think what I am doing is stupid. But don’t act like it’s useless.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she says, but by then I am in the hall. I jerk open the door to Taryn’s room to find her and Heather laughing at something. They stop when we come in.

“Jude?” Taryn asks.

“I fell off my horse,” I tell her, and Vivi doesn’t contradict me. “What are we talking about?”

Taryn is nervous, roaming around the room to touch the gauzy gown she will wear tomorrow, to hold up the circlet woven with greenery grown in goblin gardens and fresh as the moment they were plucked.

I realize that the earrings I bought for Taryn are gone, lost with the rest of the pack. Scattered among leaves and underbrush.

Servants bring wine and cakes, and I lick the sweet icing and let the conversation wash over me. The pain in my leg is distracting, but more distracting yet is the memory of the riders laughing, the memory of their closing in beneath the tree. The memory of being wounded and frightened and all alone.

When I wake the day of Taryn’s wedding, it is in the bed of my childhood. It feels like coming up from a deep dream, and, for a moment, it’s not that I don’t know where I am—it’s that I don’t remember *who* I am. For those few moments, blinking in the late-afternoon sunlight, I am Madoc’s loyal daughter, dreaming of becoming a knight in the Court. Then the last half year comes back to me like the now-familiar taste of poison in my mouth.

Like the sting of the sloppily done stitches.

I push myself up and unwrap the cloth to look at the wound. It’s ugly and swollen, and the needlework is poor. My leg is stiff, too.

Gnarbone, an enormous servant with long ears and a tail, comes into my room with a belated knock. He is carrying a tray with breakfast on it. Quickly, I flip the blankets over my lower body.

He puts the tray on the bed without comment and goes into the bath area. I hear the rush of water and smell crushed herbs. I sit there, braced, until he leaves.

I could tell him I'm hurt. It would be a simple thing. If I asked Gnarbone to send for a military surgeon, he'd do it. He'd tell Oriana and Madoc, of course. But my leg would be stitched up well and I'd be safe from infection.

Even if Madoc had sent the riders, I believe he'd still take care of me. Courtesy, after all. He'd take it to be a concession, though. I'd be admitting that I needed him, that he won. That I'd come home for good.

And yet, in the light of the morning, I am fairly sure it wasn't Madoc who sent the riders, even if it was the sort of trap he favors. He would have never sent assassins who hung back and who rode off when the numbers were still on their side.

Once Gnarbone goes out, I drink the coffee greedily and make my way to the bath.

It's milky and fragrant, and only under the water can I allow myself to weep. Only under the water can I admit that I almost died and that I was terrified and that I wish there was someone to whom I could tell all that. I hold my breath until there's no more breath to hold.

After the bath, I wrap myself in an old robe and make it back to the bed. As I try to decide if it's worth sending a servant back to the palace to get me another dress or if I should just borrow something of Taryn's, Oriana comes into the room, holding a silvery piece of cloth.

"The servants tell me you brought no luggage," she says. "I assume you forgot that your sister's wedding would require a new gown. Or a gown at all."

"At least one person is going to be naked," I say. "You know it's true. I've never been to a single revel in Faerie where *everyone* had clothes on."

"Well, if that's your plan," she says, turning on her heels. "Then I suppose all you need is a pretty necklace."

"Wait," I say. "You're right. I don't have a dress, and I need one. Please don't go."

When Oriana turns, a hint of a smile is on her face. "How unlike you, to say what you actually mean and have it be something other than hostile."

I wonder how it is for her to live in Madoc's house, to be Madoc's obedient wife and have had a hand in all his schemes being undone. Oriana is capable of more subtlety than I would have given her credit for.

And she has brought me a dress.

That seems like a kindness until she spreads it out on my bed.

“It’s one of mine,” she says. “I believe it will fit.”

The gown is silver and reminds me a little of chain mail. It’s beautiful, with trumpet sleeves slashed along the length of the arm to show skin, but it has a plunging neckline, which would look one way on Oriana and a totally different way on me.

“It’s a little, uh, daring for a wedding, don’t you think?” There’s no way to wear it with a bra.

She just looks at me for a moment, with a puzzled, almost insect-like stare.

“I guess I can try it on,” I say, remembering that I had joked about being naked just a moment ago.

This being Faerie, she makes no move to leave. I turn around, hoping that will be enough to draw attention away from my leg as I strip. Then I pull the gown over my head and let it slither over my hips. It sparkles gorgeously, but, as I suspected, it shows a lot of my chest. Like, *a lot*.

Oriana nods, satisfied. “I will send someone to do your hair.”

A short while later, a willowy pixie girl has braided my hair into ram’s horns and wrapped the tips with silver ribbon. She paints the lids of my eyes and my mouth with more silver.

Then, dressed, I go downstairs to join the rest of the family in Oriana’s parlor, as though the last few months haven’t happened.

Oriana is dressed in a gown of pale violet with a collar of fresh petals that rises to her powdery jawline. Vivi and Heather are both in mortal clothes, Vivi in a fluttery fabric with a pattern of eyes printed on the cloth, and Heather in a short pink dress with little silver spangles all over it. Heather’s hair is pulled back in sparkling pink clips. Madoc is wearing a deep plum tunic, Oak in a matching one.

“Hey,” Heather says. “We’re both in silver.”

Taryn isn’t there yet. We sit around in the parlor, drinking tea and eating bannocks.

“Do you really think she’s going to go through with this?” Vivi asks.

Heather gives her a scandalized look, swats at her leg.

Madoc sighs. “It is said we learn more from our failures than our successes,” he says with a pointed look in my direction.

Then Taryn finally comes down. She’s been bathed in lilac dew and wears a gown of incredibly fine layers of cloth on top of one another, herbs and flowers trapped between them to give the impression that she’s this beautiful, floating figure and a living bouquet at the same time.

Her hair is braided into a crown with green blooms all through it.

She looks beautiful and painfully human. In all that pale fabric, she looks like a sacrifice instead of a bride. She smiles at all of us, shy and glowingly happy.

We all rise and tell her how beautiful she looks. Madoc takes her hands and kisses them, looking at her like any proud father. Even though he thinks she's making a mistake.

We get into the carriage, along with the small hob who is going to be Oak's double, who switches jackets once we're inside, and then sits worriedly in a corner.

On our way to Locke's estate, Taryn leans forward and catches my hand. "Once I am married, things will be different."

"Some things," I say, not entirely sure what she's talking about.

"Dad has promised to keep him in line," she whispers.

I recall Taryn's appeal to me to have Locke dismissed from his position as Master of Revels. Curbing Locke's indulgences is likely to keep Madoc busy, which seems like no bad thing.

"Are you happy for me?" she asks. "Truly?"

Taryn has been closer to me than any other person in the world. She has known the tide and undertow of my feelings, my hurts, both small and large, for most of my life. It would be stupid to let anything interfere with that.

"I want *you* to be happy," I say. "Today and always."

She gives me a nervous smile, and her fingers tighten on mine.

I am still holding her hand when the hedge maze comes into view. I see three pixie girls in diaphanous gowns fly over the greenery, giggling together, and beyond them other Folk already beginning to mill. As Master of Revels, Locke has organized a wedding worthy of the title.

CHAPTER 21

The first trap goes unsprung. The decoy climbs out with my family while Oak and I duck down in the carriage. He grins at me at first, when we huddle down in the space between the cushioned benches, but the grin slips off his face a moment later, replaced by worry.

I take his hand and squeeze it. “Ready to climb through a window?”

That delights him anew. “From the carriage?”

“Yes,” I say, and wait for it to pull around. When it does, there’s a knock. I peek out and see the Bomb inside the estate. She winks at me, and then I lift up Oak and feed him, hooves first, through the carriage window and into her arms.

I climb after, inelegantly. My dress is ridiculously revealing, and my leg is still stiff, still hurting, when I fall onto Locke’s stone floor.

“Anything?” I ask, looking up at the Bomb.

She shakes her head, extending a hand to me. “That was always the long shot. My bet is on the maze.”

Oak frowns, and I rub his shoulders. “You don’t have to do this,” I tell him, although I am not sure what we do if he says he won’t.

“I’m okay,” he says without looking into my eyes. “Where’s my mom?”

“I’ll find her for you, twigling,” says the Bomb, and puts her arm over his thin shoulder to lead him out. At the doorway, she looks back at me and fishes something out of her pocket. “You seem to have hurt yourself. Good thing I don’t just cook up explosives.”

With that, she tosses me something. I catch it without knowing what it is,

and then turn it over in my hand. A pot of ointment. I look back up to thank her, but she's already gone.

Unstoppering the little pot, I breath in the scent of strong herbs. Still, once I spread it over my skin, my pain diminishes. The ointment cools the heat of what was probably imminent infection. The leg is still sore, but nothing as it was.

"My seneschal," Cardan says, and I nearly drop the ointment. I tug down my dress, turning. "Are you ready to welcome Locke into your family?"

The last time we were in this house, in the maze of the gardens, his mouth was streaked with golden nevermore, and he watched me kiss Locke with a simmering intensity that I thought was hatred.

Now, he studies me with a not dissimilar look, and all I want to do is walk into his arms. I want to drown my worries in his embrace. I want him to say something totally unlike himself, about things being okay.

"Nice dress," he says instead.

I know the Court must already think I am besotted with the High King to endure being crowned Queen of Mirth and still serve as his seneschal. Everyone must think, as Madoc does, that I am his creature. Even after he humiliated me, I came crawling back.

But what if I actually *am* becoming besotted with him?

Cardan is more knowledgeable than I am at love. He could use that against me, just as I asked him to use it against Nicasia. Perhaps he found a way to turn the tables after all.

Kill him, a part of me says, a part I remember from the night I took him captive. *Kill him before he makes you love him*.

"You shouldn't be alone," I say, because if the Undersea is going to strike then, we must not give it any easy targets. "Not tonight."

Cardan grins. "I hadn't planned on it."

The offhand implication that he's not alone most nights bothers me, and I hate that it does. "Good," I say, swallowing that feeling, though it feels like swallowing bile. "But if you're planning on taking someone to bed—or better yet, several someones—choose guards. And then have yourselves guarded by more guards."

"A veritable orgy." He seems delighted by the idea.

I keep thinking of the steady way he looked at me when we were both naked, before he pulled on his shirt and fastened those elegant cuffs. *We should have called truce*, he'd said, brushing back his ink-black hair impatiently. *We should have called truce long before this*.

But neither of us called it, not then, not after.

Jude, he'd said, running a hand up my calf, *are you afraid of me*?

I clear my throat, forcing the memories away. “I command you not to allow yourself to be alone from tonight’s sundown to tomorrow’s sunup.”

He draws back, as though bitten. He no longer expects me to deliver orders in this high-handed way, as though I don’t trust him.

The High King of Elfhame makes a shallow bow. “Your *wish*—no, strike that. Your *command* is my command,” he says.

I cannot look at him as he goes out. I am a coward. Maybe it’s the pain in my leg, maybe it’s worry over my brother, but a part of me wants to call after him, wants to apologize. Finally, when I am sure he’s gone, I head toward the party. A few steps and I am in the hallway.

Madoc looks at me from where he leans against the wall. His arms are crossed over his chest, and he shakes his head at me. “It never made sense to me. Until now.”

I stop. “What?”

“I was coming in to get Oak when I heard you speaking with the High King. Forgive me for eavesdropping.”

I can barely think through the thundering in my ears. “It’s not what you thin—”

“If it wasn’t, you wouldn’t know what I thought,” Madoc counters. “Very clever, daughter. No wonder you weren’t tempted by anything I offered you. I said I wouldn’t underestimate you, and yet I did. I underestimated you, and I underestimated both your ambition and your arrogance.”

“No,” I say. “You don’t understand—”

“Oh, I think I do,” he says, not waiting for me to explain about Oak’s not being ready for the throne, about my desire to avoid bloodshed, about how I don’t even know if I can hang on to what I have for longer than a year and a day. He’s too angry for any of that. “At last, I finally understand. Orlagh and the Undersea we will vanquish together. But when they are gone, it will be us staring across a chessboard at each other. And when I best you, I will make sure I do it as thoroughly as I would any opponent who has shown themselves to be my equal.”

Before I can think of what to say to that, he grabs hold of my arm, marching us together onto the green. “Come,” he says. “We have roles yet to play.”

Outside, blinking in the late afternoon sun, Madoc leaves me to go speak with a few knights standing in a tight knot near an ornamental pool. He gives me a nod when he departs, the nod of someone acknowledging an opponent.

A shiver goes through me. When I confronted him in Hollow Hall after poisoning his cup, I thought I had made us enemies. But this is far worse. He knows I stand between him and the crown, and it matters little whether he

loves or hates me—he will do whatever it takes to wrest that power from my hands.

With no other options, I head into the maze, toward the celebration at its center.

Three turns and it seems that the partygoers are farther away. Sounds grow muffled, and it seems to me that laughter comes from every direction. The boxwoods are high enough to be disorienting.

Seven turns and I am truly lost. I start to turn back, only to find the maze has changed itself around. The paths are not where they were before.

Of course. It can't just be a normal maze. No, it's got to be out to get me.

I remember that among this foliage are the treefolk, waiting to keep Oak safe. Whether they're the ones messing with me now, I do not know, but at least I can be sure something is listening when I speak.

"I will slice my way clean through you," I say to the leafy walls. "Let's start playing fair."

Branches rustle behind me. When I turn, there's a new path.

"This better be the way to the party," I grumble, starting on it. I hope this doesn't lead to the secret oubliette reserved for people who threaten the maze.

Another turn and I come to a stretch of little white flowers and a stone tower built in miniature. From inside, I hear a strange sound, half growl and half cry.

I draw Nightfell. Not many things weep in Faerie. And the weeping things that are more common here—like banshees—are very dangerous.

"Who's in there?" I say. "Come out or I'm coming in."

I am surprised to see Heather shuffle into view. Her ears have grown furred and long, like that of a cat. Her nose is differently shaped, and the stubs of whiskers are growing above her eyebrows and from the apples of her cheeks.

Worse, since I can't see through it, it's not a glamour. It's a real spell of some kind, and I don't think it's done with her. As I watch, a light dusting of fur grows along her arms in a patterning not unlike a tortoiseshell cat.

"What—what happened?" I stammer.

She opens her mouth, but instead of an answer, a piteous yowling comes out.

Despite myself, I laugh. Not because it's funny, because I'm startled. Then I feel awful, especially when she hisses.

I squat down, wincing at the pulling of my stitches. "Don't panic. I'm sorry. You just took me by surprise. This is why I warned you to keep that charm on you."

She makes another hissing yowl.

“Yeah,” I say, sighing. “No one likes to hear ‘I told you so.’ Don’t worry. Whatever jerk thought this was going to be a fun prank is about to have a lot of regrets. Come on.”

She follows me, shivering. When I try to put an arm around her, she flinches away with another hiss. At least she remains upright. At least she is human enough to stay with me and not run off.

We plunge into the hedges, and this time the maze doesn’t mess with us. In three turns, we are standing among guests. A fountain splashes gently, the sound of it mixing with conversation.

I look around, searching for someone I know.

Taryn and Locke aren’t there. Most likely, they have gone to a bower, where they will make private vows to each other—their true faerie marriage, unwitnessed and mysterious. In a land where there are no lies, promises need not be public to be binding.

Vivi rushes over to me, taking Heather’s hands. Her fingers have curled under in a paw-like manner.

“What’s happened?” Oriana demands.

“Heather?” Oak wants to know. She looks at him with eyes that match my sister’s. I wonder if that was the heart of the jest. A cat for a cat-eyed girl.

“Do something,” Vivi says to Oriana.

“I am no deft hand at enchantments,” she says. “Undoing curses was never my specialty.”

“Who did this? *They* can undo it.” My voice has a growl to it that makes me sound like Madoc. Vivi looks up with a strange expression on her face.

“Jude,” Oriana cautions, but Heather points with her knuckles.

Standing by a trio of flute-playing fauns is a boy with cat ears. I stride across the maze toward him. One hand goes to the hilt of my sword, all the frustration I feel over everything I cannot control bends toward fixing this one thing.

My other hand knocks the goblet of green wine out of his grip. The liquid pools on the clover before sinking into the earth under our feet.

“What is this?” he demands.

“You put a curse on that girl over there,” I tell him. “Fix her *immediately*.”

“She admired my ears,” the boy says. “I was only giving her what she desired. A party favor.”

“That’s what I am going to say after I gut you and use your entrails as streamers,” I tell him. “*I was only giving him what he wanted. After all, if he didn’t want to be eviscerated, he would have honored my very reasonable request*.”

With furious looks at everyone, he stomps across the grass and speaks a

few words. The enchantment begins to dissipate. Heather begins to cry anew, though, as her humanity returns. Huge sobbing gasps shake her.

“I want to go,” she says finally in a quavering, wet voice. “I want to go home right now and never come back.”

Vivi should have prepared her better, should have made sure she always wore a charm—or better yet, two. She should never have let Heather wander off alone.

I fear that, in some measure, this is my fault. Taryn and I hid from Vivi the worst of what it was to be human in Faerie. I think Vivi believed that because her sisters were fine, Heather would be, too. But we were never fine.

“It’s going to be okay,” Vivi is saying, rubbing Heather’s back in soothing circles. “You’re okay. Just a little weirdness. Later, you’re going to think it was funny.”

“She’s not going to think it was funny,” I say, and Vivi flashes me an angry look.

The sobbing continues. Finally, Vivi puts her finger under Heather’s chin, raising her face to look fully into it.

“You’re okay,” Vivi says again, and I can hear the glamour in her voice. The magic makes Heather’s whole body relax. “You don’t remember the last half hour. You’ve been having a lovely time at the wedding, but then took a spill. You were crying because you bruised your knee. Isn’t that silly?”

Heather looks around, embarrassed, and then wipes her eyes. “I feel a little ridiculous,” she says with a laugh. “I guess I was just surprised.”

“Vivi,” I hiss.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Vivi tells me under her breath. “But it’s just this one time. And before you ask, I’ve never done it before. But she doesn’t need to remember all of that.”

“Of course she does,” I say. “Or she won’t be careful next time.”

I am so angry that I can barely speak, but I need to make Vivi understand. I need to make her realize that even terrible memories are better than weird gaps or the hollow feeling that your feelings don’t make sense.

But before I can begin, the Ghost is at my shoulder. Vulciber, beside him. They are both in uniform.

“Come with us,” the Ghost says, uncharacteristically blunt.

“What is it?” I ask them, my voice sharp. I am still thinking about Vivi and Heather.

The Ghost is as grim as I’ve ever seen him. “The Undersea made its move.”

I look around for Oak, but he is where I left him moments before, with Oriana, watching Heather insist that she’s fine. A small frown creases the

space between his brows, but he seems otherwise utterly safe from everything but bad influence.

Cardan stands on the other side of the green, near where Taryn and Locke have just come back from swearing their vows. Taryn looks shy, with roses in her cheeks. Folk rush over to kiss her—goblins and grigs, Court ladies and hags. The sky is bright overhead, the wind sweet and full of flowers.

"The Tower of Forgetting. Vulciber insists you ought to see it," the Bomb says. I didn't even notice her walking up. She's all in black, her hair pulled into a tight bun. "Jude?"

I turn back to my spies. "I don't understand."

"We will explain on the way," Vulciber says. "Are you ready?"

"Just a second." I should congratulate Taryn before I leave. Kiss her cheeks and say something nice, and then she'll know I was here, even if I had to go. But as I look toward her, evaluating how swiftly I can do that, my gaze catches on her earrings.

Dangling from her lobes are moons and stars. The same ones I bargained for from Grimsen. The ones I lost in the wood. She wasn't wearing them when we got in the carriage, so she must have got them…

Beside her, Locke is smiling his fox smile, and when he walks, he has a slight limp.

For a moment, I just stare, my mind refusing to acknowledge what I'm seeing. Locke. It was Locke with the riders, Locke and his friends on the night before he was to be married. A bachelor party of sorts. I guess he decided to pay me back for threatening him. That, or perhaps he knew he could never stay faithful and decided to go after me before I came back for him.

I take one last look at them and realize I can do nothing now.

"Pass the news about the Undersea on to the Grand General," I tell the Bomb. "And make sure—"

"I'll watch over your brother," she reassures me. "And the High King."

Turning my back on the wedding, I follow Vulciber and the Ghost. Yellow horses with long manes are nearby, already saddled and bridled. We swing up onto them and ride to the prison.

From the outside, the only evidence that something might be wrong is the waves striking higher than I've ever seen them. Water has pooled on the

uneven flagstones.

Inside, I see the bodies. Knights, lying pale and still. The few on their backs have water filling their mouths as though their lips were the edges of cups. Others lie on their sides. All their eyes have been replaced with pearls.

Drowned on dry land.

I rush down the stairs, terrified for Cardan's mother. She is there, though, alive, blinking out at me from the gloom. For a moment, I just stand in front of her cell, hand on my chest in relief.

Then I draw Nightfell and cut straight down between bar and lock. Sparks fly, and the door opens. Asha looks at me suspiciously.

"Go," I say. "Forget our bargains. Forget everything. Get out of here."

"Why are you doing this?" she asks me.

"For Cardan," I say. I leave unsaid the second part: *because his mother is still alive and mine is not, because even if he hates you, at least he should get a chance to tell you about it.*

With one baffled look back at me, she begins to ascend.

I need to know if Balekin is still imprisoned, if he's still alive. I head lower, picking my way through the gloom with one hand against the wall and the other holding my blade.

The Ghost calls my name, probably because of Asha's abrupt arrival in front of him, but I am intent on my purpose. My feet grow swifter and more sure on the spiral steps.

I find Balekin's cell is empty, the bars bent and broken, his opulent rugs wet and covered in sand.

Orlagh took Balekin. Stole a prince of Faerie from right under my nose.

I curse my own shortsightedness. I knew they were meeting, knew they were scheming together, but I was sure, because of Nicasia, that Orlagh truly wanted Cardan to be the bridegroom of the sea. It didn't occur to me that Orlagh would act before hearing an answer. And I didn't think that when she threatened to take blood, she meant Balekin.

Balekin. It would be difficult to get the crown of Faerie on his head without Oak putting it there. But should Cardan ever abdicate, that would mean a period of instability, another coronation, another chance for Balekin to rule.

I think of Oak, who is not ready for any of this. I think of Cardan, who must be persuaded to pledge himself to me again, especially now.

I am still swearing when I hear a wave strike the rocks, hard enough to reverberate through the Tower. The Ghost shouts my name again, from closer by than I expect.

I turn as he steps into view on the other side of the room. Beside him are

three of the sea Folk, watching me with pale eyes. It takes me a moment to put the image together, to realize the Ghost is not restrained nor even menaced. To realize this is a betrayal.

My face goes hot. I want to feel angry, but instead I feel a roaring in my head that overwhelms everything else.

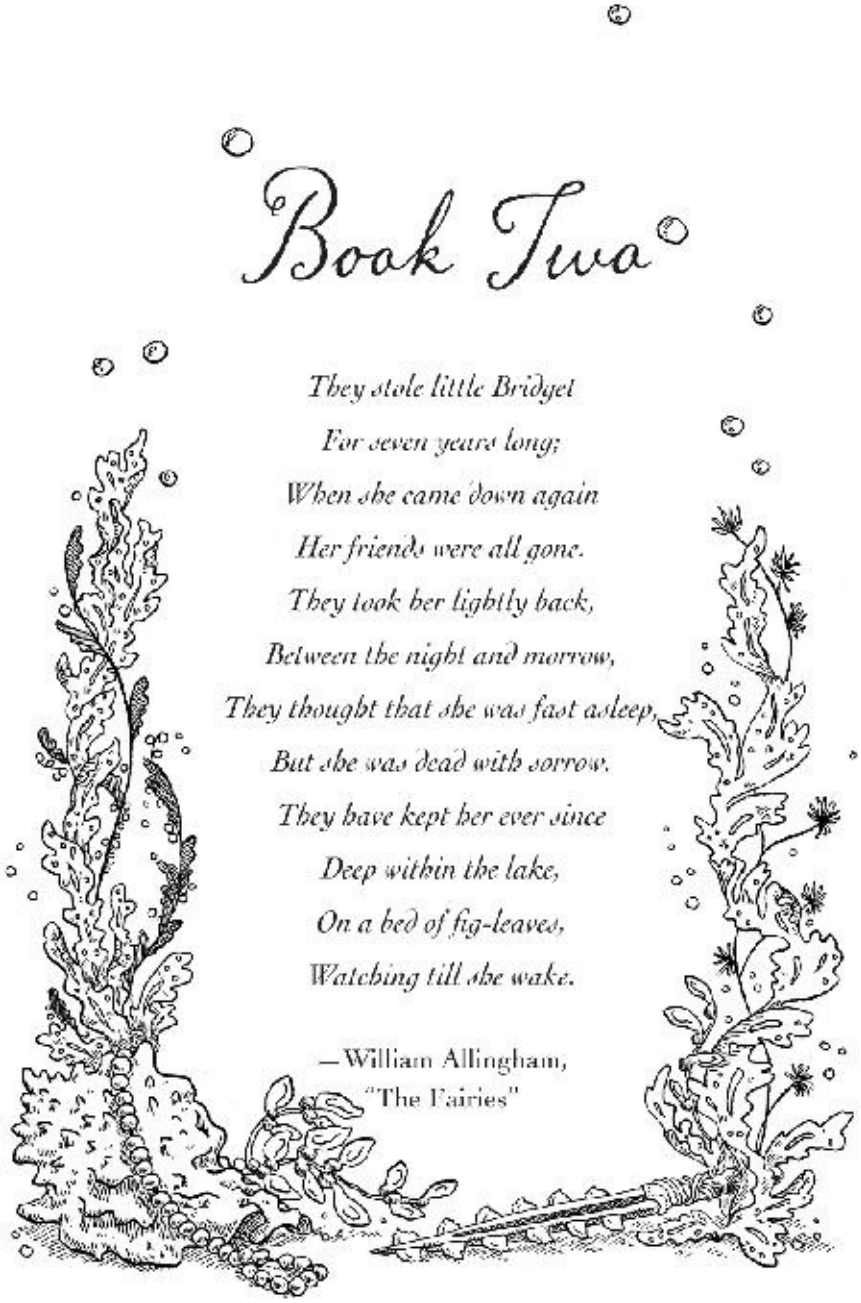
The sea crashes against the shore again, slamming into the side of the Tower. I am glad Nightfell is already in my hand.

"Why?" I ask, hearing Nicasia's words pounding in my ears like the surf: *someone you trust has already betrayed you*.

"I served Prince Dain," the Ghost says. "Not you."

I begin to speak when there is a rustle behind me. Then pain in the back of my skull and nothing more.

Book Two



They stole little Bridget
For seven years long;
When she came down again
Her friends were all gone.
They took her lightly back,
Between the night and morrow,
They thought that she was fast asleep,
But she was dead with sorrow.
They have kept her ever since
Deep within the lake,
On a bed of fig-leaves,
Watching till she wake.

—William Allingham,
"The Fairies"

CHAPTER 22

I wake at the bottom of the sea.

At first, I panic. I have water in my lungs and a terrible pressure on my chest. I open my mouth to scream, and a sound comes out, but not the one I expect. It startles me enough to stop and realize that I am not drowning.

I am alive. I am breathing water, heavily, laboriously, but I am breathing it.

Beneath me is a bed shaped from reef coral and padded with kelp, long tendrils of which flutter with the current. I am inside a building, which seems also of coral. Fish dart through the windows.

Nicasia floats at the end of my bed, her feet replaced by a long tail. It feels like seeing her for the first time to see her in the water, to see her blue-green hair whorl around her and her pale eyes shine metallic under the waves. She was beautiful on land, but here she looks elemental, terrifying in her beauty.

“This is for Cardan,” she says, just before she balls up her fist and hits me in the stomach.

I wouldn’t have thought it possible to get the momentum needed to strike someone under water, but this is her world, and she connects just fine.

“Ouch,” I say. I try to touch where she hit me, but my wrists are restrained in heavy cuffs and won’t move that far. I turn my head, seeing iron balls anchoring me to the floor. A fresh panic grips me, bringing with it a sense of unreality.

“I don’t know what trick you performed on him, but I will discover it,” she says, unnerving me with how close her guess comes to the mark. Still, it means she doesn’t *know* anything.

I force myself to concentrate on that, on the here and now, on discovering what I can do and making a plan. But it's hard when I am so very angry—angry at the Ghost for betraying me, angry at Nicasia and at myself, myself, always myself, more than anyone else. Furious at myself for winding up in this position. "What happened to the Ghost?" I spit out. "Where is he?"

Nicasia gives me a narrow-eyed look. "What?"

"He helped you kidnap me. Did you pay him?" I ask, trying to sound calm. What I most want to know is what I cannot ask—does she know the Ghost's plans for the Court of Shadows? But to find out and stop him, I must escape.

Nicasia puts her hand against my cheek, smooths back my hair. "Worry about yourself."

Maybe she wants me only her for reasons of personal jealousy. Maybe I can still get out of this.

"You think I performed a trick because Cardan likes me better than you," I say. "But you shot at him with a crossbow bolt. Of course he likes me better."

Her face goes pale, her mouth opening in surprise and then curling into rage when she realizes what I am implying—that I told him. Maybe it's not a great idea to goad her into fury when I am powerless, but I hope she will be goaded into telling me why I am here.

And how long I must stay. Already, time has passed while I was unconscious. Time when Madoc is free to scheme toward war with his new knowledge of my influence over the crown, when Cardan is entirely free to do whatever his chaotic heart desires, when Locke may make a mockery of everyone he can and draw them into his dramatics, when the Council may push for capitulation to the sea, and I can do nothing to influence any of it.

How much more time will I spend here? How long before all five months of work is undone? I think of Val Moren tossing things in the air and letting them crash down around him. His human face and his unsympathetic human eyes.

Nicasia seems to have regained her composure, but her long tail swishes back and forth. "Well, you're ours now, mortal. Cardan will regret the day he put any trust in you."

She means me to be more afraid, but I feel a little relief. They don't think I have any special power. They think I have a special vulnerability. They think they can control me as they would any mortal.

Still, relief is the last thing I ought to show. "Yeah, Cardan should definitely trust you more. You seem really trustworthy. It's not like you're actually currently betraying him."

Nicasia reaches into a bandolier across her chest and draws a blade—a shark's tooth. Holding it, she gazes at me. "I could hurt you, and you

wouldn’t remember.”

“But you would,” I say.

She smiles. “Perhaps that would be something to cherish.”

My heart thunders in my chest, but I refuse to show it. “Want me to show you where to put the point?” I ask. “It’s delicate work, causing pain without doing permanent damage.”

“Are you too stupid to be afraid?”

“Oh, I’m scared,” I tell her. “Just not of you. Whoever brought me here—your mother, I presume, and Balekin—has a use for me. I am afraid of what *that* is, but not of you, an inept torturer who is irrelevant to everyone’s plans.”

Nicasia says a word, and suffocating pain crashes in on my lungs. I can’t breathe. I open my mouth, and the agony only intensifies.

Better it’s over fast, I tell myself. But it’s not fast enough.

The next time I wake, I am alone.

I lie there, water flowing around me, lungs clear. Although the bed is still beneath me, I am aware of floating above it.

My head hurts, and I am aware of a pain in my stomach that is some combination of hunger and soreness after being punched. The water is cold, a deep chill that seeps into my veins, making my blood sluggish. I am not sure how long I’ve been unconscious, not sure how long it’s been since I was taken from the Tower. As time slips by and fish come to pluck at my feet and hair, at the stitches around my wound, anger drains away and despair fills me. Despair and regrets.

I wish I’d kissed Taryn’s cheek before I left. I wish I’d made sure Vivi understood that if she loved a mortal, she had to be more careful with her. I wish I’d told Madoc that I always intended for Oak to have the throne.

I wish I’d planned more plans. I wish I’d left more instructions. I wish I had never trusted the Ghost.

I hope Cardan misses me.

I am not sure how long I float like that, how many times I panic and pull against my chains, how many times the weight of the water over me feels oppressive and I choke on it. A merman swims into the room. He moves with immense grace through the water. His hair is a kind of striped green, and the same stripes continue down his body. His large eyes flash in the indifferent light.

He moves his hands and makes a few sounds I don’t understand. Then, obviously adjusting his expectations, he speaks again. “I am here to prepare you to join Queen Orlagh for dinner. If you give me any trouble, I can render you equally easily unconscious. That’s how I’d hoped to find you.”

I nod my head. “No trouble. Got it.”

More merfolk come into the room, ones with green tails and yellow tails and black-tipped tails. They swim around me, staring with their large, shining eyes.

One unshackles me from the bed, and another guides my body upright. I have almost no weight in the water. My body goes where it is pushed.

When they begin undressing me, I panic again, a kind of animal response. I twist in their arms, but they hold me firm and pull a diaphanous gown on over my head. It is both short and thin, barely a garment at all. It flows around me, and I am sure most of my body is visible through it. I try not to look down, for fear that I will blush.

Then I am wrapped in ropes of pearls, my hair pulled back with a crown of shells and a net of kelp. The wound on my leg is dressed with a bandage of sea grass. Finally, I am guided through the vast coral palace, its dim light punctuated by glowing jellyfish.

The merfolk lead me into a banquet room without a ceiling, so that when I look up, I see schools of fish and even a shark above me, and above that, the glimmering light of what must be the surface.

I guess it’s daytime.

Queen Orlagh sits on an enormous throne-like chair at one end of the table, the body of it encased with barnacles and shells, crabs and live starfish crawling over it, fanlike coral and bright anemone moving in the current.

She herself looks impossibly regal. Her black eyes rake over me, and I flinch, knowing that I am looking at someone who has ruled longer than the span of generations of mortal lives.

Beside her sits Nicasia, in an only slightly less impressive chair. And at the other end of the table is Balekin, in a chair much diminished from either of theirs.

“Jude Duarte,” he says. “Now you know how it feels to be a prisoner. How is it to rot in a cell? To think you will die there?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “I always knew I was getting out.”

At that, Queen Orlagh tips back her head and laughs. “I suppose you have, in a manner of speaking. Come to me.” I hear the glamour in her voice and remember what Nicasia said about my not remembering whatever she did to me. Truly, I should be glad she didn’t do worse.

My flimsy gown makes it clear I am not wearing any charms. They do not

know the geas Dain put on me. They believe I am entirely susceptible to glamours.

I can pretend. I can do this.

I swim over, keeping my face carefully blank. Orlagh gazes deeply into my eyes, and it's excruciatingly hard not to look away, to keep my face open and sincere.

"We are your friends," Orlagh says, stroking my cheek with long nails. "You love us very much, but you must never tell anyone how much outside of this room. You are loyal to us and would do absolutely anything for us. Isn't that right, Jude Duarte?"

"Yes," I say readily.

"What would you do for me, little minnow?" she asks.

"Anything, my queen," I tell her.

She looks down the table at Balekin. "You see? That's how it's done."

He appears sullen. He thinks a lot of himself and mislikes being put in his place. The eldest of Eldred's children, he resented his father for not seriously considering him for the throne. I am sure he hates the way Orlagh talks to him. If he didn't need this alliance, and if he wasn't in her domain, I doubt he would allow it.

Perhaps here is a divide for me to exploit.

Soon a parade of dishes is brought out in cloches full of air, so that even under the water, they are dry until about to be eaten.

Raw fish, cut into artful rosettes and cunning shapes. Oysters, perfumed with roasted kelp. Roe, glistening red and black.

I don't know if it's allowed for me to eat without being explicitly granted permission, but I am hungry and willing to risk being reprimanded.

The raw fish is mild and mixed in some peppery green. I didn't anticipate liking it, but I do. I quickly swallow three pink strips of tuna.

My head still hurts, but my stomach starts to feel better.

As I eat, I think about what I must do: listen carefully and act in every way as though I trust them, as though I am loyal to them. To do that, I must imagine myself into at least the shadow of that feeling.

I look over at Orlagh and imagine that it was she instead of Madoc who brought me up, that I was Nicasia's sort-of sister, who was sometimes mean but ultimately looked out for me. At Balekin, my imaginings balk, but I try to think of him as a new member of the family, someone I was coming to trust because everyone else did. I turn a smile on them, a generous smile that almost doesn't feel like a lie.

Orlagh looks over at me. "Tell me about yourself, little minnow."

The smile almost wavers, but I concentrate on my full stomach, on the

wonder and beauty of the landscape.

“There’s little to know,” I say. “I’m a mortal girl who was raised in Faerie. That’s the most interesting thing about me.”

Nicasia frowns. “Did you kiss Cardan?”

“Is that important?” Balekin wants to know. He is eating oysters, spearing them one after another with a tiny fork.

Orlagh doesn’t answer, just nods toward Nicasia. I like that she does that, putting her daughter above Balekin. It’s good to have something to like about her, something to concentrate on to keep the warmth in my voice real.

“It’s important if it’s the reason he didn’t agree to an alliance with the Undersea,” Nicasia says.

“I don’t know if I am supposed to answer,” I say, looking around in what I hope appears like honest confusion. “But yes.”

Nicasia’s expression crumples. Now that I am “glamoured,” she doesn’t seem to think of me as a person in front of whom she has to pretend to stoicism. “More than once? Does he love you?”

I didn’t realize how much she’d hoped I was lying when I’d told her I kissed him. “More than once, but no. He doesn’t love me. Nothing like it.”

Nicasia looks at her mother, inclining her head, indicating she got the answers she wanted.

“Your father must be very angry with you for ruining all his plans,” Orlagh says, turning the conversation to other things.

“He is,” I say. Short and sweet. No lies I don’t have to tell.

“Why didn’t the general tell Balekin about Oak’s parentage?” she continues. “Wouldn’t that have been easier than scouring Elfhame for Prince Cardan after taking the crown?”

“I am not in his confidence,” I say. “Not then and definitely not now. All I know is that he had a reason.”

“Doubtless,” Balekin says, “he meant to betray me.”

“If Oak was High King, then it would really be Madoc who ruled Elfhame,” I say, because it’s nothing that they don’t know.

“And you didn’t want that.” A servant comes in with a little silken handkerchief filled with fish. Orlagh spears one with a long fingernail, causing a thin ribbon of blood to snake toward me in the water. “Interesting.”

Since it’s not a question, I don’t have to answer.

A few other servants begin to clear the plates.

“And would you take us to Oak’s door?” Balekin asks. “Take us to the mortal world and take him from your big sister, carry him back to us?”

“Of course,” I lie.

Balekin shoots a look toward Orlagh. If they took Oak, they could foster

him under the sea, they could marry him to Nicasia, they could have a Greenbriar line of their own, loyal to the Undersea. They would have options beyond Balekin for access to the throne, which cannot please him.

A long game, but in Faerie, that's a reasonable way to play.

"This Grimsen creature," Orlagh asks her daughter. "You really believe he can make a new crown?"

My heart feels for a moment as though it's stuttered to a stop. I am glad no one was looking at me, because in that moment, I do not believe I could have hidden my horror.

"He made the Blood Crown," says Balekin. "If he made that, surely he can make another."

If they don't need the Blood Crown, then they don't need Oak. They don't need to foster him, don't need him to place the crown on Balekin's head, don't need him alive at all.

Orlagh gives him a look that's a reprimand. She waits for Nicasia's answer.

"He's a smith," Nicasia says. "He cannot forge beneath the sea, so he will always favor the land. But with the death of the Alderking, he craves glory. He wishes to have a High King who will give him that."

This is their plan, I tell myself to try to stifle the panic I feel. *I know their plan.* If I can escape, then I can stop it.

A knife in Grimsen's back before he finishes the crown. I sometimes doubt my effectiveness as a seneschal, but never as a killer.

"Little minnow," Orlagh says, her attention returning to me. "Tell me what Cardan promised you to help him."

"But she—" Nicasia begins, but Orlagh's look silences her.

"Daughter," says the Queen of the Undersea, "you do not see what is right beneath your nose. Cardan got a throne from this girl. Stop searching for what she has over him—and start looking for what he had over her."

Nicasia turns a petulant look on me. "What do you mean?"

"You've said that Cardan didn't much care for her. And yet she made him High King. Consider that perhaps he realized she'd be useful and exploited that usefulness, through kisses and flattery, much as you've cultivated the little smith."

Nicasia looks puzzled, as though all her ideas of the world are upset. Perhaps she didn't think of Cardan as someone capable of scheming. Still, I can see something about this pleases her. If Cardan has seduced me to his side, then she need no longer worry that he cares for me. Instead, she need only worry over my usefulness.

"What did he promise you for getting him the crown of Elfhame?" Orlagh

asks me with exquisite gentleness.

“I always wanted a place in Faerie. He told me he would make me his seneschal and put me at his right hand, like Val Moren in Eldred’s Court. He’d make sure I was respected and even feared.” It’s a lie, of course. He never promised me anything, and Dain promised far less than that. But, oh, if someone had—if Madoc had—it would have been very hard to turn down.

“You’re telling me that you betrayed your father and put that fool on the throne in exchange for a *job*?” Balekin demands incredulously.

“Being the High King of Elfhame is also a job,” I return. “And look at what has been sacrificed to get that.” For a moment, I pause, wondering if I have spoken too harshly for them to believe I am still glamoured, but Orlagh only smiles.

“True, my dear,” she says after a pause. “And aren’t we putting our faith in Grimsen, even as we offer him a not particularly dissimilar reward.”

Balekin looks unhappy, but he doesn’t dispute it. Far easier to believe that Cardan was the mastermind than a mortal girl.

I manage to eat three more slices of fish and drink some kind of toasted rice and seaweed tea through a clever straw that leaves it unmixed with sea water before I am led to a sea cave. Nicasia accompanies the merfolk guards taking me there.

This is no bedchamber, but a cage. Once I am pushed through, however, I discover that while I am still soaking wet, my surroundings are dry and filled with air I abruptly can’t breathe.

I choke, my body spasming. And up from my lungs comes all that water, along with a few pieces of partially digested fish.

Nicasia laughs.

Then, glamour heavy in her voice, she speaks. “Isn’t this a beautiful room?”

What I see is only a rough stone floor, no furniture, no nothing.

Her voice is dreamy. “You’ll love the four-poster bed, wrapped in coverlets. And the cunning little side tables and your own pot of tea, still steaming. It will be perfectly warm and delicious whenever you try it.”

She sets down a glass of sea water on the floor. I guess that’s the tea. If I drink it, as she suggests, my body will become quickly dehydrated. Mortals can go for a few days without fresh water, but since I was breathing sea water, I may already be in trouble.

“You know,” she says as I pretend to admire the room, turning around in it in awe, feeling foolish, “nothing I could do to you will be as terrible as what you’ll do to yourself.”

I turn to her, frowning in the pretense of puzzlement.

“No matter,” she says, and leaves me to spending the rest of the evening tossing and turning on the hard floor, trying to seem as though I feel it is the height of comfort.

CHAPTER 23

I wake to terrible cramps and dizziness. Cold sweat beads on my brow, and my limbs shiver uncontrollably.

For the better part of a year, I have been poisoning my body every day. My blood is used to the doses, far higher than they were when I began. Addicted to them, so that now it craves what it once reviled. Now I can’t do without the poison.

I lie on the stone floor and try to marshal my thoughts. Try to remember the many times Madoc was on a campaign and tell myself that he was uncomfortable on each one. Sometimes he slept stretched out on the ground, head pillowed on a clump of weeds and his own arms. Sometimes he was wounded and fought on anyway. He didn’t die.

I am not going to die, either.

I keep telling myself that, but I am not sure I believe it.

For days, no one comes.

I give up and drink the sea water.

Sometimes I think about Cardan while I am lying there. I think about what it must have been like to grow up as an honored member of the royal family, powerful and unloved. Fed on cat milk and neglect. To be arbitrarily beaten by the brother you most resembled and who most seemed to care for you.

Imagine all those courtiers bowing to you, allowing you to hiss and slap at them. But no matter how many of them you humiliated or hurt, you would always know someone had found them worthy of love, when no one had ever found you worthy.

Despite growing up among the Folk, I do not always understand the way they think or feel. They are more like mortals than they like to believe, but the moment I allow myself to forget they're not human, they will do something to remind me. For that reason alone, I would be stupid to think I knew Cardan's heart from his story. But I wonder at it.

I wonder what would have happened if I told him that he wasn't out of my system.

They come for me eventually. They allow me a little water, a little food. By then, I am too weak to worry about pretending to be glamoured.

I tell them the details I remember about Madoc's strategy room and what he thinks about Orlagh's intentions. I go over the murder of my parents in visceral detail. I describe a birthday, pledge my loyalty, explain how I lost my finger and how I lied about it.

I even lie to them, at their command.

And then I have to pretend to forget when they tell me to forget. I have to pretend to feel full when they have told me I feasted and to be drunk on imaginary wine when all I've had is a goblet of water.

I have to allow them to slap me.

I can't cry.

Sometimes, when lying on the cold stone floor, I wonder if there's a limit to what I will let them do, if there is something that would make me fight back, even if it dooms me.

If there is, that makes me a fool.

But maybe if there isn't, that makes me a monster.

"Mortal girl," Balekin says one afternoon when we're alone in the watery chambers of the palace. He does not like using my name, perhaps because he doesn't like having to recall it, finding me as disposable as all the human girls who have come through Hollow Hall.

I am weak with dehydration. They regularly forget to give me fresh water and food, enchanting me illusory sustenance when I beg for it. I am having difficulty concentrating on anything.

Despite the fact that Balekin and I are alone in a coral chamber, with guards swimming patrols at intervals that I count automatically, I do not even try to fight and flee. I have no weapon and little strength. Even were I able to kill Balekin, I am not a strong enough swimmer to make it to the surface

before they caught me.

My plan has narrowed to endurance, to surviving hour by hour, sunless day by day.

Perhaps I cannot be glamoured, but that doesn't mean I cannot be broken.

Nicasia has said that her mother has many palaces in the Undersea and that this, built into the rock of Insweal and along the seafloor beneath it, is only one of them. But for me, it is a constant torment to be so close to home and yet leagues beneath it.

Cages hang in the water all through the palace, some of them empty, but many of them containing mortals with graying skin, mortals who seem as though they ought to be dead but occasionally move in ways that suggest they are not. The *drowned ones*, the guards sometimes call them, and more than anything, that's what I fear becoming. I remember thinking I'd spotted the girl I pulled out of Balekin's house at Dain's coronation, the girl that threw herself into the sea, the girl who'd certainly drowned. Now I am not so sure I was wrong.

"Tell me," Balekin says today. "Why did my brother steal my crown? Orlagh thinks she understands, because she understands the craving for power, but she doesn't understand Cardan. He never much cared for hard work. He liked charming people, sure. He liked making trouble, but he despaired of real effort. And whether or not Nicasia would admit it, she doesn't understand, either. The Cardan she knows might have manipulated you, but not into this."

This is a test, I think nonsensically. A test where I have to lie, but I am afraid my ability to make sense has deserted me.

"I am no oracle," I say, thinking of Val Moren and the refuge he's found in riddles.

"Then guess," he says. "When you paraded in front of my cell in the Tower of Forgetting, you suggested it was because I'd had a firm hand with him. But you of all people must believe he lacked discipline and that I sought his improvement."

He must be remembering the tournament that Cardan and I fought and the way he tormented me. I am tangled up in memories, in lies. I am too exhausted to make up stories. "In the time I knew him, he drunkenly rode a horse through a lesson from a well-respected lecturer, tried to feed me to nixies, and attacked someone at a revel," I say. "He did not seem to be disciplined. He seemed to have his way all the time."

Balekin seems surprised. "He sought Eldred's attention," he says finally. "For good or for ill, and mostly for ill."

"Then perhaps he wants to be High King for Eldred's sake," I say. "Or to

spite his memory."

That's seems to draw Balekin's attention. Though I said it only to suggest something that would misdirect him from thinking too much about Cardan's motives, once it comes out of my mouth, I ponder whether there isn't some truth to it.

"Or because he was angry with you for chopping off Eldred's head. Or being responsible for the deaths of all his siblings. Or because he was afraid you might murder him too."

Balekin flinches. "Be quiet," he says, and I go gratefully silent. After a moment, he looks down at me. "Tell me which of us is worthy of being High King, myself or Prince Cardan?"

"You are," I say easily, giving him a look of practiced adoration. I do not point out that Cardan is no longer a prince.

"And would you tell him that yourself?" he asks.

"I would tell him whatever you wish," I say with all the sincerity I can wearily muster.

"Would you go to him in his rooms and stab him again and again until his red blood ran out?" Balekin asks, leaning closer. He says the words softly, as though to a lover. I cannot control the shudder that runs through me, and I hope he will believe it is something other than disgust.

"For you?" I ask, closing my eyes against his closeness. "For Orlagh? It would be my pleasure."

He laughs. "Such savagery."

I nod, trying to rein in overeagerness at the thought of being sent on a mission away from the sea, at having the opportunity for escape. "Orlagh has given me so much, treated me like a daughter. I want to repay her. Despite the loveliness of my chambers and the delicacies I am given, I was not made to be idle."

"A pretty speech. Look at me, Jude."

I open my eyes and gaze up at him. Black hair floats around his face, and here, under the water, the thorns on his knuckles and running up his arms are visible, like the spiky fins of a fish.

"Kiss me," he says.

"What?" My surprise is genuine.

"Don't you want to?" he asks.

This is nothing, I tell myself, certainly better than being slapped. "I thought you were Orlagh's lover," I tell him. "Or Nicasia's. Won't they mind?"

"Not in the least," he tells me, watching carefully.

Any hesitation on my part will seem suspicious, so I move toward him in

the water, pressing my lips against his. The water is cold, but his kiss is colder.

After what I hope is a sufficient interval, I pull back. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, clearly disgusted, but when he stares down at me, there's greed in his eyes. "Now kiss me as though I were Cardan."

To buy myself a moment of reflection, I gaze into his owl eyes, run my hands up his thorned arms. It is clearly a test. He wants to know how much control he has over me. But I think he wants to know something else, too, something about his brother.

I force myself to lean forward again. They have the same black hair, the same cheekbones. All I have to do is pretend.

The next day, they bring me a pitcher of clear river water, which I guzzle gratefully. The day after that, they begin to prepare me to return to the surface.

The High King has made a bargain to get me back.

I think back over the many commands I gave him, but none was specific enough to have ordered his paying a ransom for my safe return. He had been free of me, and now he is willingly bringing me back.

I do not know what that means. Perhaps politics demanded it, perhaps he really, really didn't like going to meetings.

All I know is that I am giddy with relief, wild with terror that this is some kind of a game. If we do not go to the surface, I fear I will not be able to hide the pain of disappointment.

Balekin "glamours" me again, making me repeat my loyalty to them, my love, my murderous intent toward Cardan.

Balekin comes to the cave, where I am pacing back and forth, each scuff of my bare feet on the stone loud in my ears. I have never been so much alone, and I have never had to play a role for this long. I feel hollowed out, diminished.

"When we return to Elfhame, we won't be able to see each other often," he says, as though this is something I will greatly miss.

I am so jumpy that I do not trust myself to speak.

“You will come to Hollow Hall when you can.”

I wonder at the idea that he anticipates living in Hollow Hall, that he doesn’t expect to be put in the Tower. I suppose his freedom is part of the price of my release, and I am surprised all over again that Cardan agreed to pay it.

I nod.

“If I need you, I will give you a signal, a red cloth dropped in your path. When you see it, you must come immediately. I expect that you will be able to fabricate some excuse.”

“I will,” I say, my voice coming out too loud in my ears.

“You must regain the High King’s trust, get him alone, and then find a way to kill him. Do not attempt it if people are around. You must be clever, even if it takes more than one meeting. And perhaps you can find out more of your father’s schemes. Once Cardan is dead, we will need to move fast to secure the military.”

“Yes,” I say. I take a breath and then dare ask what I really want to know. “Do you have the crown?”

He frowns. “Very nearly.”

For a long moment, I do not speak. I let the silence linger.

Into it, Balekin speaks. “Grimsen needs you to finish your work before he can make it. He needs my brother dead.”

“Ah,” I say, my mind racing. Once, Balekin risked himself to save Cardan, but now that Cardan stands between him and the crown, he seems willing enough to sacrifice his brother. I try to make sense of that, but I can’t focus. My thoughts keep spiraling away.

Balekin smiles a shark’s grin. “Is something the matter?”

I am almost broken.

“I feel a little faint,” I say. “I don’t know what could be wrong. I remember eating. At least I think I remember eating.”

He gives me a concerned look and calls for a servant. In a few moments, I am brought a platter of raw fish, oysters, and inky roe. He watches in disgust as I devour it.

“You will avoid all charms, do you understand? No rowan, no bundles of oak, ash and thorn. You will not wear them. You will not so much as touch them. If you are given one, you will cast it into a fire as soon as you can conceal doing so.”

“I understand,” I say. The servant has brought no more fresh water for me, but wine instead. I drink it greedily with no care for the strange aftertaste or how it goes to my head.

Balekin gives me more commands, and I try to listen, but by the time he leaves, I am dizzy from the wine, exhausted and sick.

I curl up on the cold floor of my cell and for a moment, right before I close my eyes, I can almost believe I am in the grand room they have been conjuring for me with their glamours. Tonight, the stone feels like a feather bed.

CHAPTER 24

The next day my head pounds as I am once again dressed, and my hair is braided. Merfolk put me in my own clothes—the silver dress I wore to Taryn's wedding, now faded from exposure to salt and frayed from being picked at by Undersea creatures. They even strap Nightfell onto me, although the scabbard is rusted, and the leather looks as though something has been feasting on it.

Then I am taken to Balekin, dressed in the colors and wearing the sigil of the Undersea. He looks me over and hangs new pearls in my ears.

Queen Orlagh has assembled a huge procession of sea Folk. Merfolk, riders on enormous turtles and sharks, the selkies in their seal form, all cutting through the water. The Folk on the turtles carry long red banners that fan behind them.

I am seated on a turtle, beside a mermaid with two bandoliers of knives. She grips me firmly, and I do not struggle, though it is hard to keep still. Fear is terrible, but the combination of hope and fear is worse. I careen between the two, my heart beating so fast and my breaths coming so quickly that my insides feel bruised.

When we begin to rise, up and up and up, a sense of unreality grips me.

We crest the surface in the narrow stretch between Insweal and Insmire.

On the shore of the island, Cardan sits in a fur-lined cloak, regal on a dappled gray steed. He is surrounded by knights in armor of gold and green. To one side of him is Madoc, on a sturdy roan. To the other is Nihuar. The trees are full of archers. The hammered gold of the oak leaves on Cardan's

crown seems to glow in the dimming light of sunset.

I am shaking. I feel I may shake apart.

Orlagh speaks from her place at the center of our procession. “King of Elfhame, as we agreed, now that you have paid my price, I have secured the safe return of your seneschal. And I bring her to you escorted by the new Ambassador to the Undersea, Balekin, of the Greenbriar line, son of Eldred, your brother. We hope this choice will please you, since he knows so many customs of the land.”

Cardan’s face is impossible to read. He doesn’t look at his brother. Instead, his gaze goes impossibly to me. Everything in his demeanor is icy.

I am small, diminished, powerless.

I look down, because if I don’t, I am going to behave stupidly. *You have paid my price*, Orlagh said to him. What might he have done for my return? I try to recall my commands, to recall whether I forced his hand.

“You promised her whole and hale,” says Cardan.

“And you can see she is so,” Orlagh says. “My daughter Nicasia, Princess of the Undersea, will help her to the land with her own royal hands.”

“Help her?” says Cardan. “She ought to need no help. You have kept her in the damp and the cold for too long.”

“Perhaps you no longer want her,” Orlagh says. “Perhaps you would bargain for something else in her place, King of Elfhame.”

“I will have her,” he says, sounding both possessive and contemptuous at once. “And my brother will be your ambassador. It shall all be as we agreed.” He nods toward two guards, who wade out to where I am sitting and help me down, help me to walk. I am ashamed of my unsteady legs, of my weakness, of the ridiculousness of still being dressed in Oriana’s utterly unsuitable dress for a party long over.

“We are not yet at war,” says Orlagh. “Nor are we yet at peace. Consider well your next move, king of the land, now that you know the cost of defiance.”

The knights guide me onto the land and past the other folk. Neither Cardan nor Madoc turn as I pass them. A carriage is waiting a little ways into the trees, and I am loaded inside.

One knight removes her helm. I have seen her before, but I do not know her. “The general has instructed me to take you to his home,” she says.

“No,” I say. “I have to go to the palace.”

She does not contradict me, neither does she relent. “I must do as he says.”

And although I know I ought to fight, that once upon a time I would have, I don’t. I let her shut the door of the carriage. I lean back against the seats and close my eyes.

When I wake, the horses are kicking up dust in front of Madoc's stronghold. The knight opens the door, and Gnarbone lifts me bodily from the carriage as easily as I might have lifted Oak, as though I am made of twigs and leaves instead of earthly flesh. He carries me to my old bedroom.

Tatterfell is waiting for us. She takes down my hair and strips off my dress, carrying away Nightfell and putting me into a shift. Another servant sets down a tray holding a pot of hot tea and a plate of venison bleeding onto toast. I sit on the rug and eat it, using the buttered bread to sop up the meat juices.

I fall asleep there, too. When I wake, Taryn is shaking me.

I blink hazily and stumble to my feet. "I'm up," I say. "How long was I lying there?"

She shakes her head. "Tatterfell says that you've been out for the whole day and night. She worried that you had a human illness—that's why she sent for me. Come on, at least get in bed."

"You're married now," I say, recalling it suddenly. With that comes the memory of Locke and the riders, the earrings I was supposed to give her. It all feels so far away, so distant.

She nods, putting her wrist to my forehead. "And you look like a wraith. But I don't think you have a fever."

"I'm fine," I say, the lie coming automatically to my lips. I have to get to Cardan and warn him about the Ghost. I have to see the Court of Shadows.

"Don't act so proud," she says, and there are tears in her eyes. "You disappeared on my wedding night, and I didn't even know you were gone until morning. I've been so frightened.

"When the Undersea sent word it had you, well, the High King and Madoc blamed each other. I wasn't sure what was going to happen. Every morning, I went to the edge of the water and looked down, hoping I could see you. I asked all the mermaids if they could tell me if you were okay, but no one would."

I try to imagine the panic she must have felt, but I can't.

"They seem to have worked through their differences," I say, thinking of them together at the beach.

"Something like it." She makes a face, and I try to smile.

Taryn helps me into my bed, arranging the cushions behind me. I feel bruised all over, sore and ancient and more mortal than ever before.

"Vivi and Oak?" I ask. "Are they okay?"

"Fine," she says. "Back home with Heather, who seems to have gotten through her visit to Faerieland without much drama."

"She was glamoured," I say.

For a moment, I see anger cross her face, raw and rare. “Vivi shouldn’t do that,” Taryn says.

I am relieved not to be the only one to feel that way. “How long have I been gone?”

“A little over a month,” she says, which seems impossibly brief. I feel as though I have aged a hundred years beneath the sea.

Not only that, but now I am more than halfway through the year and a day Cardan promised. I sink back on the cushions and close my eyes. “Help me get up,” I say.

She shakes her head. “Let the kitchens send up more soup.”

It isn’t difficult to persuade me. As a concession, Taryn helps me dress in clothes that were once too tight and now hang on me. She stays to feed me spoonfuls of broth.

When she’s ready to go, she pulls up her skirts and takes a long hunting knife out of a sheath attached to a garter. In that moment, it’s clear we grew up in the same house.

She puts the knife onto the coverlets beside a charm she takes from her pocket. “Here,” she says. “Take them. I know they’ll make you feel safer. But you must rest. Tell me you won’t do anything rash.”

“I can barely stand on my own.”

She gives me a stern look.

“Nothing rash,” I promise her.

She embraces me before she goes, and I hang a little too long on her shoulders, drinking in the human smell of sweat and skin. No ocean, no pine needles or blood or night-blooming flowers.

I doze off with my hand on her knife. I am not sure when I wake, but it’s to the sound of arguing.

“Whatsoever the Grand General’s orders, I am here to see the High King’s seneschal and I won’t be put off with any more excuses!” It’s a woman’s voice, one I half-recognize. I roll off the bed, heading dizzily out into the hall, where I can look down from the balcony. I spot Dulcamara from the Court of Termites. She looks up at me. There is a fresh cut on her face.

“Your pardon,” she calls in a way that makes it clear she means nothing of the sort. “But I must have an audience. In fact, I am here to remind you of your obligations, including that one.”

I recall Lord Roiben with his salt-white hair and the promise I made him for supporting Cardan half a year ago. He pledged to the crown and the new High King, but on a specific condition.

Someday, I will ask your king for a favor, he said.

What did I say in return? I tried to bargain: *Something of equal value. And*

within our power.

I guess he's sent Dulcamara to call in that favor, though I do not know what use I am to be when I am like this.

"Is Oriana in her parlor? If not, show Dulcamara to it, and I will speak with her there," I say, gripping the railing so that I don't fall. Madoc's guards look unhappy, but they don't contradict me.

"This way," says one of the servants, and with a last hostile look at me, Dulcamara follows.

This leaves me time to make my unsteady way down the stairs.

"Your father's orders were that you not go out," one of the guards says, used to my being a child to be minded and not the High King's seneschal with whom one might behave with more formality. "He wanted you to rest."

"By which you mean he didn't order me *not* to have audiences here, but only because he didn't think of it." The guard doesn't contradict me, only frowns. "His concerns—and yours—are noted."

I manage to make it to Oriana's parlor without falling over. And if I hold slightly too long to the wooden trim around windows or to the edges of tables, that's not so awful.

"Bring us some tea please, as hot as you can make it," I say to a servant who watches me a little too closely.

Steeling myself, I let go of the wall and walk into the parlor, give Dulcamara a nod, and sink into a chair, although she has remained standing, hands clasped behind her back.

"Now we see what your High King's loyalty looks like," she says, taking a step toward me, her face hostile enough that I wonder if her purpose is more than speaking.

Instinct wants to push me to my feet. "What happened?"

At that, she laughs. "You know very well. Your king gave the Undersea permission to attack us. It came two nights ago, out of nowhere. Many of our people were slain before we understood what was happening, and now we are being forbidden from retaliating."

"Forbidden from retaliating?" I think of what Orlagh said about not being at war, but how can the land not be at war if the sea has already attacked? As the High King, Cardan owes his subjects the might of his military—of Madoc's army—when they are under threat. But to deny permission of striking back was unheard of.

She bares her teeth. "Lord Roiben's consort was hurt," she says. "Badly."

The green-skinned, black-eyed pixie who spoke as though she were mortal. The one that the terrifying leader of the Court of Termites deferred to, laughed with.

“Is she going to live?” I ask, my voice gone soft.

“You best hope so, mortal,” Dulcamara says. “Or Lord Roiben will bend his will to the destruction of your boy king, despite the vows he made.”

“We’ll send you knights,” I say. “Let Elfhame rectify our mistake.”

She spits on the ground. “You don’t understand. Your High King did this for you. Those were the terms under which Queen Orlagh would return you. Balekin chose the Court of Termites as the target, the Undersea attacked us, and your Cardan let her. There was no mistake.”

I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose. “No,” I say. “That’s not possible.”

“Balekin has long had a grudge against us, daughter of dirt.”

I flinch at the insult, but I do not correct her. She may rail at me all she likes. The High Court has failed the Court of Termites because of me.

“We should never have joined the High Court. We should never have pledged to your fool of a king. I have come to deliver that message and one message more. You owe Lord Roiben a favor, and it best be granted.”

I worry over what he might ask me for. An unnamed favor is a dangerous thing to give, even for a mortal who cannot be forced to honor it.

“We have our own spies, seneschal. They tell us you’re a good little murderer. Here is what we want—*kill Prince Balekin*.”

“I can’t do that,” I say, too astonished to weigh my words. I am not insulted by her praise of my skill at killing, but setting me an impossible task is hardly flattery, either. “He’s an ambassador of the Undersea. If I killed him, we’d be at war.”

“Then go to war.” With that, she sweeps from the room, leaving me sitting in Oriana’s parlor when the steaming tray of tea comes in.

Once she is gone and the tea is cold, I climb the steps to my room. There, I take up Taryn’s knife and the other one hidden under my bed. I take the edge of one to the pocket of my dress, slicing through it so I can strap the knife to my thigh and draw it swiftly. There are plenty of weapons in Madoc’s house—including my own Nightfell—but if I start looking for them and belting them on properly, the guards are sure to notice. I need them to believe I have gone docilely back to bed.

Padding to the mirror, I look to see if the knife is concealed beneath my dress. For a moment, I don’t know the person looking back at me. I am

horrified at what I see—my skin has a sickly pallor, my weight has dropped enough to make my limbs look frail and sticklike, my face gaunt.

I turn away, not wanting to look anymore.

Then I go out onto the balcony instead. Normally, it would be no small thing to climb over the railing and scale the wall down to the lawn. But as I put one leg over, I realize how rubbery my legs and arms have become. I don’t think I can manage the climb.

So I do the next best thing: I jump.

CHAPTER 25

I get up, grass stains on my knees, my palms stinging and dirty. My head feels unsteady, as though I am still expecting to move with the current even though I am on land.

Taking a few deep breaths, I drink in the feeling of the wind on my face and the sounds of it rustling the leaves of the trees. I am surrounded by the scents of land, of Faerie, of home.

I keep thinking about what Dulcamara said: that Cardan refused to retaliate for the sake of my safe return. That can't have made his subjects happy with him. I am not sure even Madoc would think it was a good strategy. Which is why it's difficult to imagine why he agreed to it, especially since, if I stayed stuck in the Undersea, he'd be out of my control. I never thought he liked me enough to save me. And I am not sure I'll still believe it unless I hear his reasons from his lips.

But for whatever reason he brought me back, I need to warn him about the Ghost, about Grimsen and the crown, about Balekin's plan to make me into his murderer.

I start toward the palace on foot, sure it will take the guards far longer to realize I have gone than it would take the stable hands to discover a missing mount. Still, I am breathing hard soon after I start. Halfway there I have to stop and rest on a stump.

You're fine, I tell myself. *Get up*.

It takes me a long time to make it to the palace. As I walk toward the doors, I square my shoulders and try not to show just how exhausted I am.

“Seneschal,” one of the guards at the gate says. “Your pardon, but you are barred from the palace.”

You will never deny me an audience or give an order to keep me from your side. For a delirious moment, I wonder if I’ve been in the Undersea for longer than Taryn told me. Maybe a year and a day is up. But that’s impossible. I narrow my gaze. “By whose command?”

“Apologies, my lady,” another knight says. His name is Diarmad. I recognize him as a knight Madoc has his eye on, someone he would trust. “The general, your father, gave the order.”

“I have to see the High King,” I say, trying for a tone of command, but instead a note of panic creeps into my voice.

“The Grand General told us to call you a carriage if you came and, if necessary, ride in it with you. Do you expect you will require our presence?”

I stand there, furious and outmaneuvered. “No,” I say.

Cardan *couldn’t* refuse me an audience, but he could *allow* someone else to give the order. So long as Madoc didn’t ask for Cardan’s permission, it didn’t contradict my commands. And it wouldn’t be so hard to figure out the sort of things I might have commanded Cardan—after all, most of it was stuff Madoc would probably have ordered himself.

I knew that Madoc wanted to rule Faerie from behind the throne. It didn’t occur to me that he might find his way to Cardan’s side and cut me out.

They played me. Either together or separately, they played me.

My stomach churns with anxiety.

The feeling of being fooled, the shame of it, haunts me. It tangles up my thoughts.

I recall Cardan sitting atop the dappled gray horse on the beach, his impassive face, furred cloak, and crown highlighting his resemblance to Eldred. I may have tricked him into his role, but I didn’t trick the land into receiving him. He has real power, and the longer he’s on the throne, the greater his power will become.

He’s become the High King, and he’s done it without me.

This is everything I feared when I came up with this stupid plan in the first place. Perhaps Cardan didn’t want this power at first, but now that he has it, it belongs to him.

But the worst part is that it makes sense that Cardan is out of my reach, for him to be inaccessible to me. Diarmad and the other knight’s stopping me at the palace doors is the fulfillment of a fear I’ve had since this masquerade began. And as terrible as it feels, it also seems more reasonable than what I’ve been trying to convince myself of for months—that I am the seneschal of the High King of Faerie, that I have real power, that I can keep this game going.

The only thing I wonder is why not let me languish beneath the sea?

Turning away from the palace, I head through the trees to where there's an entrance into the Court of Shadows. I just hope I won't run into the Ghost. If I do, I am not sure what will happen. But if I can get to the Roach and the Bomb, then maybe I can rest awhile. And get the information I need. And to send someone to slit Grimsen's throat before he has completed making the new crown.

When I get there, though, I realize the entrance is collapsed. No, as I look at it more carefully, that's not exactly right—there's evidence of an explosion. Whatever destroyed this entrance did more damage than that.

I cannot breathe.

Kneeling in the pine needles, I try to understand what I am looking at, because it seems as though the Court of Shadows has been *buried*. This must have been the Ghost's work—although the Bomb's explosives could have done precise damage like this. When the Ghost said he wouldn't let me have the Court of Shadows, I didn't realize he meant to destroy it. I just hope Van and the Bomb are alive.

Please let them be alive.

And yet, without a way to find them, I am more trapped than ever. Numbly, I wander back toward the gardens.

A group of faerie children has gathered around a lecturer. A Lark boy picks blue roses from the royal bushes, while Val Moren wanders beside him, smoking a long pipe, his scald crow perched on one shoulder.

His hair is unbrushed around his head, matted in places and braided with bright cloth and bells in others. Laugh lines crease the corners of his mouth.

"Can you get me inside the palace?" I ask him. It's a long shot, but I don't care about embarrassment anymore. If I can get inside, I can discover what happened to the Court of Shadows. I can get to Cardan.

Val Moren's eyebrows rise. "Do you know what they are?" he asks me, waving a vague hand toward the boy, who turns to give us both a sharp-eyed look.

Maybe Val Moren cannot help me. Maybe Faerie is a place where a madman can play the fool and seem like a prophet—but maybe he is only a madman.

The Lark boy continues picking his bouquet, humming a tune.

"Faeries…?" I ask.

"Yes, yes." He sounds impatient. "The Folk of the Air. Insubstantial, unable to hold one shape. Like the seeds of flowers launched into the sky."

The scald crow caws.

Val Moren takes a long pull on his pipe. "When I met Eldred, he rode up

on a milk-white steed, and all the imaginings of my life were as dust and ashes."

"Did you love him?" I ask.

"Of course I did," he tells me, but he sounds as though he's talking about long ago, an old tale that he only needs to tell the way it was told before. "Once I met him, all the duty I felt for my family was rendered as frayed and worn as an old coat. And the moment his hands were on my skin, I would have burned my father's mill to the ground to have him touch me again."

"Is that love?" I ask.

"If not love," he says, "something very like it."

I think of Eldred as I knew him, aged and bent. But I also recall him the way he seemed younger when the crown was taken from his head. I wonder how much younger he would have grown had he not been cut down.

"Please," I say. "Just help me get into the palace."

"When Eldred rode up in his milk-white steed," he says again, "he made me an offer. 'Come with me,' he said, 'to the land under the hill, and I will feed you on apples and honey wine and love. You will never grow old, and all you wish to know, you may discover.'"

"That sounds pretty good," I admit.

"Never make a bargain with them," he tells me, taking my hand abruptly. "Not a wise one or a poor one, not a silly one or a strange one, but especially not one that sounds pretty good."

I sigh. "I've lived here nearly all my life. I know that!"

My voice startles his crow, which leaps from his shoulder to fly up into the sky.

"Then know this," Val Moren says, looking at me. "I may not help you. It was one of the things I gave up. I promised Eldred that once I became his, I would renounce all of humanity. I would never choose a mortal over a faerie."

"But Eldred is dead," I insist.

"And yet my promise remains." He holds his hands in front of him in acknowledgement of his helplessness.

"We're human," I say. "We can lie. We can break our word." But the look he turns on me is pitying, as though I am the one who is mistaken.

Watching him walk off, I make a decision. Only one person has a reason to help me, only one person I can be sure of.

You will come to Hollow Hall when you can, Balekin told me. Now is as good a time as any.

I force myself to walk, though the path through the Milkwood is not a direct one, and it passes too close to the sea for my comfort. When I look out at the water, a shudder comes over me. It will not be easy to live on an island

if I am tormented by waves.

I pass by the Lake of Masks. When I look down, I see three pixies staring back at me with apparent concern. I plunge my hands in and scrub my face with the fresh water. I even drink a little, even though it's magical water and I'm not sure it's safe. Still, fresh water was too dear for me to pass up an opportunity to have it.

Once Hollow Hall is in sight, I pause for a moment, to get breath and courage both.

I walk up to the door as boldly as I can. The knocker on the door is a piercing through the nose of a sinister, carved face. I lift my hand to touch the ring, and the carving's eyes open.

"I remember you," says the door. "My prince's lady."

"You're mistaken," I say.

"Seldom." The door swings open with a slight creak that indicates disuse. "Hail and welcome."

Hollow Hall is empty of servants and guards. No doubt it is difficult for Prince Balekin to cozen any of the Folk to serve him when he is so clearly a creature of the Undersea. And I have effectively cut off his ability to trick mortals into the kind of horrible servitude in which he is most interested. I walk through echoing rooms to a parlor, where Balekin is drinking wine surrounded by a dozen thick pillar candles. Above his head, red moths dance. He left them behind in the Undersea, but now that he's back, they circle around him like a candle flame.

"Did anyone see you?" he asks.

"I don't believe so," I say with a curtsy.

He stands, going to a long trestle table and lifting a small, blown glass vial. "I don't suppose you've managed to murder my brother?"

"Madoc has ordered me away from the palace," I say. "I think he fears my influence over the High King, but I can do nothing to Cardan if I am not allowed to see him."

Balekin takes another sip of his wine and walks to me. "There's to be a ball, a masquerade to honor one of the lower Court lords. It will be tomorrow, and so long as you are able to steal away from Madoc, I will find a way to get you in. Can you acquire a costume and mask yourself, or will you need that from me as well?"

"I can costume myself," I say.

"Good." He holds up the vial. "Stabbing would be very dramatic at such a public function, but poison is ever so much easier. I want you to carry this with you until you have a moment alone with him, then you must add it to his wine in secret."

“I will,” I vow.

Then he takes my chin, glamour in his voice. “Tell me that you’re mine, Jude.”

When he places the vial in my hand, my fingers close over it.

“I am your creature, Prince Balekin,” I say, looking into his eyes and lying with my whole broken heart. “Do with me what you will. I am yours.”

CHAPTER 26

As I am about to leave Hollow Hall, I am suddenly beset by a wave of exhaustion. I sit down on the steps, light-headed, and wait until the feeling passes. A plan is growing in my mind, a plan that requires the cover of dark and my being well-rested and reasonably well-equipped.

I could go to Taryn's house, but Locke would be there, and he did try to kill me that one time.

I could return to Madoc's, but if I do, it's likely that the servants have been instructed to roll me up in fuzzy blankets and hold me in cushioned captivity until Cardan is no longer under my command, but sworn to obey his Grand General.

Horrifyingly, I wonder if the best thing to do is to stay *here*. There are no servants, no one to bother me but Balekin, and he is preoccupied. I doubt he would even notice my presence in this enormous and echoing house.

I mean to be practical, but it is very hard when it means fighting against instincts that tell me to run as far and as fast from Balekin as I can. But I've exhausted myself already.

Having snuck through Hollow Hall enough times before, I know the way to the kitchens. I drink more water from the pump just beyond it, finding myself desperately thirsty. Then, I wend my way up the steps to where Cardan once slept. The walls are as bare as I remember, the half-tester bed dominates the room with its carvings of dancing, bare-breasted cat girls.

He had books and papers—now gone—but the closet is still full of extravagant and abandoned clothes. I suppose they are no longer ridiculous

enough for the High King. But more than a few are black as night, and there's hose that will be easy to move in. I crawl into Cardan's bed, and although I fear I will toss and turn with nerves, I surprise myself by slipping immediately into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Upon waking in the moonlight, I go to his closet and dress myself in the simplest of his clothes—a velvet doublet that I rip pearls from the collar and cuffs, along with a pair of plain, soft leggings.

I set out again, feeling less wobbly. When I pass through the kitchens, I find little in the way of food, but there's a corner of hard bread that I gnaw on as I walk through the dark.

The Palace of Elfhame is a massive mound with most of the important chambers—including the enormous throne room—underground. At the peak is a tree, its roots worming down more deeply than could come from anything but magic. Just beneath the tree, however, are the few rooms that have panes of thin crystal letting in light. They are unfashionable rooms, like the one Cardan once set fire to the floor of and where Nicasia popped out of his wardrobe to shoot him.

That room is now sealed, the double doors locked and barred so that the passage to the royal chambers cannot be accessed. It would be impossible to get inside from within the palace.

But I am going to climb the hill.

Quietly, stealthily, I set off, sinking my two knives into the dirt, pulling myself up, wedging my feet on rocks and roots, and then doing it again. Higher and higher I go. I see bats circling overhead and freeze, willing them not to be anyone's eyes. An owl calls from a nearby tree, and I realize how many things could be observing me. All I can do is go faster. I am nearly to the first set of windows when weakness hits me.

I grit my teeth and try to ignore the shaking of my hands, the unsteadiness of my step. I am breathing too fast, and all I want to do is give myself a rest. I am sure, though, that if I do, my muscles will stiffen up, and I won't be able to start again. I keep going, although my whole body hurts.

Then I stab one of the knives into the dirt and try to lever myself up, but my arm is too weak. I can't do it. I stare down the steep, rocky hill, at the twinkling lights around the entrance to the brugh. For a moment, my vision blurs, and I wonder what would happen if I just let go.

Which is a stupid thought. What would happen is that I would roll down the hill, hit my head, and hurt myself really badly.

I hold on, scrabbling my way toward the glass panes. I have looked at the maps of the palace enough times that I only have to peer into three before I find the correct one. It looks down on only darkness, but I get to work,

chipping at the crystal with my knife until it cracks.

I wrap my hands in the sleeve of the doublet and break off pieces of it. Then I drop through into the darkness of the rooms that Cardan abandoned. The walls and furnishings still stink of smoke and sour wine. I make my way by touch to the armoire.

From there it is easy to open the passage and pad down the hall, down the spiraling path to the royal chamber.

I slip into Cardan's room. Though it is not yet dawn, I am lucky. The room is empty of revelry. No courtiers doze on the cushions or in his bed. I walk to where he sleeps and press my hand over his mouth.

He wakes, fighting against my grip. I press down hard enough that I can feel his teeth against my skin.

He grabs for my throat, and for a moment, I am scared that I'm not strong enough, that my training isn't good enough. Then his body relaxes utterly, as though realizing who I am.

He shouldn't relax like that. "He sent me to kill you," I whisper against his ear.

A shiver goes through his body, and his hand goes to my waist, but instead of pushing me away, he pulls me into the bed with him, rolling my body across him onto the heavily embroidered coverlets.

My hand slips from his mouth, and I am unnerved to find myself here, in the very bed that I felt too human to lie in, beside someone who terrifies me the more I feel for him.

"Balekin and Orlagh are planning your murder," I say, flustered.

"Yes," he says lazily. "So why did I wake up at all?"

I am awkwardly conscious of his physicality, of the moment when he was half awake and pulled me against him. "Because I am difficult to charm," I say.

That makes him give a soft laugh. He reaches out and touches my hair, traces the hollow of my cheekbone. "I could have told my brother that," he says, with a softness in his voice I am utterly unprepared for.

"If you hadn't allowed Madoc to bar me from seeing you, I might have told you all this sooner. I have information that cannot wait."

Cardan shakes his head. "I know not of what you speak. Madoc told me that you were resting and that we should let you heal."

I frown. "I see. And in the interim, Madoc would no doubt take my place as your advisor," I tell Cardan. "He gave your guard orders to keep me out of the palace."

"I will give them different orders," Cardan says. He sits up in the bed. He's bare to the waist, his skin silvery in the soft glow of the magical lights.

He continues looking at me in this strange way, as though he's never seen me before or as though he thought he might never see me again.

"Cardan?" I say, his name tasting strange on my tongue. "A representative from the Court of Termites came to see me. She told me something—"

"What they asked in exchange for you," he says. "I know all the things you will say. That it was foolish to agree to pay their price. That it destabilizes my rule. That it was a test of my vulnerabilities, and that I failed it. Even Madoc believed it was a betrayal of my obligations, although his alternatives weren't exactly diplomatic, either. But you do not know Balekin and Nicasia as I do—better they think you are important to me than to believe what they do to you is without consequences."

I consider how they treated me when they believed me to be valuable and shudder.

"I have thought and thought since you were gone, and there is something I wish to say." Cardan's face is serious, almost grave, in a way that he seldom allows himself to be. "When my father sent me away, at first I tried to prove that I was nothing like he thought me. But when that didn't work, I tried to be exactly what he believed I was instead. If he thought I was bad, I would be worse. If he thought I was cruel, I would be horrifying. I would live down to his every expectation. If I couldn't have his favor, then I would have his wrath.

"Balekin did not know what to do with me. He made me attend his debauches, made me serve wine and food to show off his tame little prince. When I grew older and more ill-tempered, he grew to like having someone to discipline. His disappointments were my lashings, his insecurities my flaws. And yet, he was the first person who saw something in me he liked—himself. He encouraged all my cruelty, inflamed all my rage. And I got worse.

"I wasn't kind, Jude. Not to many people. Not to you. I wasn't sure if I wanted you or if I wanted you gone from my sight so that I would stop feeling as I did, which made me even more unkind. But when you were gone—truly gone beneath the waves—I hated myself as I never have before."

I am so surprised by his words that I keep trying to find the trick in them. He can't truly mean what he's saying.

"Perhaps I am foolish, but I am not a fool. You like something about me," he says, mischief lighting his face, making its planes more familiar. "The challenge? My pretty eyes? No matter, because there is more you do not like and I know it. I can't trust you. Still, when you were gone, I had to make a great many decisions, and so much of what I did right was imagining you beside me, Jude, giving me a bunch of ridiculous orders that I nonetheless obeyed."

I am robbed of speech.

He laughs, his warm hand going to my shoulder. “Either I’ve surprised you or you are as ill as Madoc claimed.”

But before I can say anything, before I can even figure out what I might say, a crossbow is suddenly lowered at me. Behind it stands the Roach, with the Bomb at his heels, twin daggers in her hands.

“Your Majesty, we tracked her. She came from your brother’s house, and she’s here to kill you. Please step out of the bed,” says the Bomb.

“That’s ridiculous,” I say.

“If that’s true, show me what charms you’re wearing,” says the Roach. “Rowan? Is there even salt in your pockets? Because the Jude I know wouldn’t go around with nothing.”

My pockets are empty, of course, since Balekin would check for anything, and I don’t need it anyway. But it doesn’t leave me a lot of options in terms of proof. I could tell them about the geas from Dain, but they have no reason to believe me.

“Please get out of the bed, Your Majesty,” repeats the Bomb.

“I should be the one to get out—it’s not my bed,” I say, moving toward the footboard.

“Stay where you are, Jude,” says the Roach.

Cardan slips out of the sheets. He’s naked, which is briefly shocking, but he goes and pulls on a heavily embroidered dressing gown with no apparent shame. His lightly furred tail twitches back and forth in annoyance. “She woke me,” he says. “If she was intent on murder, that’s hardly the way to go about it.”

“Empty your pockets,” the Roach tells me. “Let’s see your weapons. Put everything on the bed.”

Cardan settles himself in a chair, his dressing gown settling around him like a robe of state.

I have little. The heel of bread, gnawed but unfinished. Two knives, crusted with dirt and grass. And the stoppered vial.

The Bomb lifts it up and looks at me, shaking her head. “Here we go. Where did you get this?”

“From Balekin,” I say, exasperated. “Who tried to glamour me to murder Cardan because he needs him dead to persuade Grimsen to make him his own crown of Elfhame. And that is what I came to tell the High King. I would have told you first, but I couldn’t get to the Court of Shadows.”

The Bomb and the Roach share a disbelieving look.

“If I was really glamoured, would I have told you any of that?”

“Probably not,” says the Bomb. “But it would make for a quite clever

piece of misdirection."

"I can't be glamoured," I admit. "It's part of a bargain I made with Prince Dain, in exchange for my service as a spy."

The Roach's eyebrows go up. Cardan gives me a sharp look, as though sure anything to do with Dain can't be good. Or perhaps he's just surprised that I have yet another secret.

"I wondered what he gave you to make you throw in your lot with us ne'er-do-wells," the Bomb says.

"Mostly a purpose," I say, "but also the ability to resist glamour."

"You could still be lying," says the Roach. He turns to Cardan. "Try her."

"Your pardon?" Cardan says, drawing himself up, and the Roach seems to suddenly remember to whom he's speaking in such an offhanded way.

"Don't be such a prickly rose, Your Majesty," the Roach says with a shrug and a grin. "I'm not giving you an order. I'm suggesting that if you tried to glamour Jude, we could find out the truth."

Cardan sighs and walks toward me. I know this is necessary. I know that he doesn't intend to hurt me. I know he *can't* glamour me. And yet I draw back automatically.

"Jude?" he asks.

"Go ahead," I say.

I hear the glamour enter his voice, heady and seductive and more powerful than I expected. "Crawl to me," he says with a grin. Embarrassment pinks my cheeks.

I stay where I am, looking at all their faces. "Satisfied?"

The Bomb nods. "You're not charmed."

"Now tell me why I ought to trust you," I say to her and the Roach. "The Ghost came, with Vulciber, to take me to the Tower of Forgetting. Urged me to go alone, led me right to where I was to be captured, all because he didn't want me to have Dain's Court of Shadows. Were either of you in on it with him?"

"We didn't know what was going on with the Ghost until it was too late," the Roach says.

I nod. "I saw the old forest entrance to the Court of Shadows."

"The Ghost activated some of our own explosives." He dips his head toward the Bomb, who nods.

"Collapsed part of the castle, along with the lair of the Court of Shadows, not to mention the old catacombs where Mab's bones lie," Cardan says.

"He's been planning this for a while. I was able to keep it from being worse," she says. "A few of us got out unscathed—Snapdragon is well and spotted you climbing the hill of the palace. But many were hurt in the blast.

The sluagh—Niniel—got badly burned."

"What about the Ghost?" I ask.

"He's on the wind," the Bomb says. "Gone. We know not where."

I remind myself that so long as the Bomb and the Roach are okay, things could have been a lot worse.

"Now that we're all on the same dreary page," Cardan says. "We must discuss what to do next."

"If Balekin thinks he can get me into the masquerade, then let him bend his will toward that aim. I'll play along." I stop and turn to Cardan. "Or I could just kill him."

The Roach claps his hand on the back of my neck with a laugh. "You did good, kid, you know that? You came out of the sea even tougher than you went in."

I have to look down because I am surprised by how much I wanted to hear someone say that. When I glance back up, Cardan is watching me carefully. He looks stricken.

I shake my head, to keep him from saying whatever he's thinking.

"Balekin is the Ambassador to the Undersea," he says instead, an echo of my own words to Dulcamara. I am grateful for a return to the subject. "He's protected by Orlagh. And she has Grimsen and a mighty desire to test me. If her ambassador was killed, she would be very angry."

"Orlagh attacked the land already," I remind him. "The only reason she hasn't declared outright war is that she's seeking every advantage. But she will. So let the first blow be ours."

Cardan shakes his head.

"He wants to have *you* killed," I insist. "Grimsen has made that a condition of his getting the crown."

"You should have the hands of the smith," the Bomb says. "Cut them off at the wrists so he can make no more trouble."

The Roach nods. "I will find him tonight."

"The three of you have one solution to every problem. *Murder.* No key fits every lock." Cardan gives us all a stern look, holding up a long-fingered hand with my stolen ruby ring still on one finger. "Someone tries to betray the High King, *murder*. Someone gives you a harsh look, *murder*. Someone disrespects you, *murder*. Someone ruins your laundry, *murder*.

"I find the more I listen, the more I am reminded that I have been awakened after very little sleep. I am going to send for some tea for myself and some food for Jude, who looks a bit pale."

Cardan stands and sends a servant for oatcakes, cheese, and two enormous pots of tea, but he does not allow anyone else into the room. He carries the

large carved-wood-and-silver tray from the door himself, setting it down on a low table.

I am too hungry to resist making a sandwich from the cakes and cheese. After I eat a second one and wash it down with three cups of tea, I do feel steadier.

“The masquerade tomorrow,” Cardan says. “It is to honor Lord Roiben of the Court of Termites. He has come all this way to yell at me, so we ought to let him. If Balekin’s assassination attempt keeps him busy until after that, so much the better.

“Roach, if you can spirit away Grimsen to somewhere he won’t cause any trouble, that would be most helpful. It’s time for him to choose sides and bend his knee to one of the players in this little game. But I do not want Balekin dead.”

The Roach takes a sip of tea and raises one bushy brow. The Bomb sighs audibly.

Cardan turns to me. “Since you were taken, I’ve gone over all the history I could find on the relationship of the land and the sea. From when the first High Queen, Mab, summoned the isles of Elfhame from the depths, our Folk have occasionally skirmished, but it seems clear that should we in earnest, there will be no victor. You said that you thought Queen Orlagh was waiting for an advantage to declare war. Instead, I think she is trying a new ruler—one she hopes she can trick or replace with another indebted to her. She thinks me young and feckless and means to take my measure.”

“So what?” I ask. “Our choice is to endure her games, no matter how deadly, or engage in a war we cannot win?”

Cardan shakes his head and drinks another cup of tea. “We show her that I am no feckless High King.”

“And how do we do that?” I ask.

“With great difficulty,” he says. “Since I fear she is right.”

CHAPTER 27

It would be a small thing to smuggle one of my own dresses out of my own rooms, but I don't want Balekin to guess I've been inside the palace. Instead, I head to the Mandrake Market on the tip of Insmoor to find something suitable for the masquerade.

I've been to the Mandrake Market twice before, both times long past and accompanying Madoc. It is exactly the sort of place that Oriana warned Taryn and I away from—entirely too full of Folk eager to make bargains. It's open only in the misty mornings, when most of Elfhame is asleep, but if I can't get a gown and a mask there, I will have to steal one out of a courtier's wardrobe.

I walk through the stalls, a little queasy from the smell of oysters smoking on a bed of kelp, the scent reminding me forcefully of the Undersea. I pass trays of spun-sugar animals, little acorn cups filled with wine, enormous sculptures of horn, and a stall where a bent-backed woman takes a brush and draws charms on the soles of shoes. It takes some wandering, but I finally find a collection of sculpted leather masks. They are pinned to a wall and cunningly shaped like the faces of strange animals or laughing goblins or boorish mortals, painted gold and green and every other color imaginable.

I find one that is of a human face, unsmiling. "This one," I say to the shopkeeper, a tall woman with a hollow back. She gives me a dazzling smile.

"Seneschal," she says, recognition lighting her eyes. "Let it be my gift to you."

"That's very kind," I say, a little desperately. All gifts come with a price, and I am already struggling to pay my debts. "But I'd prefer—"

She winks. “And when the High King compliments your mask, you will let me make him one.” I nod, relieved that what she wants is straightforward. The woman takes the mask from me, laying it down on the table and pulling out a pot of paint from beneath a desk. “Let me make a little alteration.”

“What do you mean?”

She takes out a brush. “So she looks more like you.” And with a few swipes of the brush, the mask does bear my likeness. I stare at it and see Taryn.

“I will remember your kindness,” I say as she packs it up.

Then I depart and look for the fluttering cloth that marks a dress shop. I find a lace-maker instead and get a little turned around in a maze of potion-makers and tellers of fortunes. As I attempt to find my way back, I pass a stall occupied by a small fire. A hag sits on a little stool before it.

She stirs the pot, and from it comes the scent of stewing vegetables. When she glances in my direction, I recognize her as Mother Marrow.

“Come and sit by my fire?” she says.

I hesitate. It doesn’t do to be rude in Faerie, where the highest laws are those of courtesy, but I am in a hurry. “I am afraid that I—”

“Have some soup,” she says, picking up a bowl and shoving it toward me. “It is only that which is most wholesome.”

“Then why offer it to me?” I ask.

She gives a delighted laugh. “If you had not cost my daughter her dreams, I might well like you. Sit. Eat. Tell me, what have you come to the Mandrake Market for?”

“A dress,” I say, moving to perch by the fire. I take the bowl, which is filled with unappetizing, thin brown liquid. “Perhaps you could consider that your daughter might not have liked a princess of the sea for a rival. I spared her that, at least.”

She gives me an evaluating look. “She was spared you, moreover.”

“Some might say that was a prize above price,” I tell her.

Mother Marrow gestures to the soup, and I, who can afford no more enemies, bring it to my lips. It tastes of a memory I cannot quite place, warm afternoons and splashing in pools and kicking plastic toys across the brown grass of summer lawns. Tears spring to my eyes.

I want to spill it out in the dirt.

I want to drink it down to the dregs.

“That’ll fix you right up,” she says as I blink back everything I was feeling and glare at her. “Now, about that dress. What would you give me for one?”

I take off the pair of pearl earrings from the Undersea. “How about these? For the dress and the soup.” They are worth more than the price of ten

dresses, but I do not want to engage in any more bargaining, especially with Mother Marrow.

She takes them, sliding her teeth over the nacre, then tucking them away in a pocket. “Well enough.” Out of another pocket, she takes a walnut and holds it out to me.

I raise my eyebrows.

“Don’t you trust me, girl?” she asks.

“Not as far as I can throw you,” I return, and she lets out another cackle.

Still, *something* is in the walnut, and it’s probably *some* kind of gown, because otherwise she wouldn’t be honoring the terms of the agreement. And I will not play the naive mortal for her, demanding to know how everything works. With that thought, I stand.

“I don’t much like you,” she says, which is not an enormous surprise, although it stings. “But I like the sea Folk far less.”

Thusly dismissed, I take the walnut and my mask and make the trek back to Insmire and Hollow Hall. I look out at the waves all around us, the expanse of ocean in every direction with its constant, restless, white-tipped waves. When I breathe, salt spray catches me in the back of my throat, and when I walk, I must avoid tide pools with little crabs in them.

It seems hopeless to fight something so vast. It seems ridiculous to believe we can win.

Balekin is sitting in a chair near the stairs when I come into Hollow Hall. “And where did you spend the night?” he asks, all insinuation.

I go over to him and lift my new mask. “Costuming.”

He nods, bored again. “You may ready yourself,” he says, waving vaguely to the stairs.

I go up. I am not sure which room he intends for me to use, but I go again to Cardan’s. There, I sit on the rug before the unlit grate and crack open the walnut. Out spills pale apricot muslin, frothing quantities of it. I shake the dress. It has an empire waist and wide, gathered sleeves that start just above the elbow so that my shoulders are bare. It hangs down to the floor in more gathered pleats.

When I put it on, I realize the fabric is the perfect complement to my complexion, although nothing can make me look less starved. No matter how the dress flatters me, I can’t get away from the feeling that my skin doesn’t fit. Still, it will do well for the night.

As I adjust it, however, I realize the dress has several cunningly hidden pockets. I transfer the poison to one. I transfer the smallest of my knives to another.

Then I attempt to make myself presentable. I find a comb among Cardan's things and attempt to fix my hair. I have nothing to put it up with, so I wear it loose around my shoulders. I wash out my mouth. Then, tying the mask on, I head back to where Balekin waits.

Up close, I am likely to be recognized by those who know me well, but otherwise I think I will be able to pass unnoticed through the larger crowd.

When he sees me, he has no visible reaction but impatience. He stands. "You know what to do?"

Sometimes lying is a real pleasure.

I take the stoppered vial from my pocket. "I was a spy for Prince Dain. I have been a part of the Court of Shadows. You can trust me to kill your brother."

That brings a smile to his face. "Cardan was an ungrateful child to imprison me. He ought to have put me beside him. He ought to have made me seneschal. Really, he ought to have given me the crown."

I say nothing, thinking of the boy I saw in the crystal. The boy who still hoped he might be loved. Cardan's admission of who he has become since haunts me: *If he thought I was bad, I would be worse*.

How well I know that feeling.

"I will mourn my youngest brother," Balekin says, seeming to cheer himself a bit at the thought. "I may not mourn the others, but I will have songs composed in his honor. He alone will be remembered."

I think of Dulcamara's exhortation to kill Prince Balekin, that he was the one who ordered the attack on the Court of Termites. Maybe he was even responsible for the Ghost setting explosives in the Court of Shadows. I recall him under the sea, exultant in his power. I think of all that he's done and all he intends to do and am glad I am masked.

"Come," he says, and I follow him out the door.

Only Locke would make the ridiculous choice of arranging a *masquerade* for a grave affair of state such as hosting Lord Roiben after an attack on his lands. And yet, when I sweep into the brugh on Balekin's arm, such a thing appears underway. Goblins and grigs, pixies and elves, all cavort in endless

intertwined circle dances. Honey wine flows freely from horns, and tables are stacked with ripe cherries, gooseberries, pomegranates, and plums.

I walk from Balekin toward the empty dais, scanning the crowd for Cardan, but he is nowhere to be seen. I catch sight of salt-white hair instead. I am partway to the convocation from the Court of Termites when I pass Locke.

I swing toward him. “You tried to kill me.”

He startles, a ridiculous grin coming to his face once he recognizes me. Maybe he doesn’t remember the way he limped on his wedding day, but surely he must have known I would see the earrings in Taryn’s ears. Maybe because the consequences took so long in coming, he supposed they wouldn’t come at all.

“It wasn’t supposed to be so serious,” he says, reaching for my hand. “I only wanted you to be afraid the way you’d frightened me.”

I jerk my fingers from his grip. “I have little time for you now, but I will *make time* for you anon.”

Taryn, dressed in a gorgeous panniered ball gown all robin’s egg blue, embroidered with delicate roses, and wearing a lacy mask over her eyes, sweeps up to us. “Make time for Locke? Whatever for?”

He raises his brows, then takes his wife’s hand. “Your twin is upset with me. She had a gift all planned out for you, but I was the one to present the gift in her stead.”

That’s accurate enough that it’s hard to contradict him, especially given the suspicious way that Taryn is looking at me.

“What gift?” she wants to know. Perhaps she assumes we went somewhere together to choose something. I ought to just tell her about the riders, about how I hid the fight in the forest from her because I didn’t want her to be upset on her wedding day, about how I lost the earrings that Locke must have found, about how I cut one of the riders down and threw a dagger at her husband. About how he wanted me dead.

But if I say all that, will she believe me?

As I am trying to decide how to respond, Lord Roiben moves in front of us, looking down at me with his shining silver eyes, twin mirrors.

Locke bows. My sister sinks into a beautiful curtsy, and I copy her as best as I can.

“An honor,” she says. “I’ve heard many of your ballads.”

“Hardly mine,” he demurs. “And largely exaggerated. Though blood does bounce on ice. That line is very true.”

My sister looks momentarily discomfited. “Did you bring your consort?”

“Kaye, yes, she’s in plenty of those ballads as well, isn’t she? No, I am afraid she didn’t come this time. Our last journey to the High Court was not

quite what I promised her it would be."

Dulcamara said she was badly hurt, but he is taking care to avoid saying so; interesting care. Not a single lie, but a web of misdirections.

"The coronation," Taryn says.

"Yes," he goes on. "Not quite the minibreak either of us envisioned."

Taryn smiles a little at that, and Lord Roiben turns toward me. "You will excuse Jude and me?" he asks Taryn. "We have something pressing to discuss."

"Of course," she says, and Roiben escorts me away, toward one of the darker corners of the hall.

"Is she well?" I ask. "Kaye?"

"She will live," he says tersely. "Where is your High King?"

I scan the hall again, my gaze going to the dais and the empty throne. "I don't know, but he will be here. He spoke to me only last evening of his regret over your losses and his desire to speak with you."

"We both know who was behind this attack," Roiben says. "Prince Balekin blames me for throwing my weight and influence behind you and your princeling when you got him a crown."

I nod, glad of his calm.

"You made me a promise," he says. "Now it is time to determine if a mortal is truly as good as her word."

"I will fix things," I vow. "I will find a way to fix things."

Lord Roiben's face is calm, but his silver eyes are not, and I am forced to remember that he murdered his way to his own throne. "I will speak to your High King, but if he cannot give me satisfaction, then I must call in my debt."

And with that, he departs in a swish of his long cloak.

Courtiers cover the floor, executing intricate steps—a circle dance that turns in on itself, splits into three and re-forms. I see Locke and Taryn out there, together, dancing. Taryn knows all the steps.

I will have to do something about Locke eventually, but not tonight, I tell myself.

Madoc sweeps into the room, Oriana on his arm. He is dressed in black, and she in white. They look like chess pieces on opposite sides of the board. Behind them come Mikkel and Randalin. A quick scan of the room and I spot Baphen speaking with a horned woman it takes me a moment to recognize, and when I do, it comes with a jolt.

Lady Asha. Cardan's mother.

I knew she was a courtier before, saw it in the crystal globe on Eldred's desk, but now it is as though I am seeing her for the first time. She wears a high-skirted gown, so that her ankles show along with little shoes cunningly

made to resemble leaves. Her whole gown is in shades of autumn, leaves and blossoms of more cloth stitched over the length of it. The tips of her horns have been painted with copper, and she wears a copper circlet, which is not a crown but is reminiscent of one.

Cardan said nothing to me about her, and yet somehow they must have effected a reconciliation. He must have pardoned her. As another courtier leads her out to the dance, I am uncomfortably aware that she is likely to acquire both power and influence quickly—and that she will do nothing good with either.

"Where is the High King?" Nihuar asks. I didn't notice the Seelie representative until she was beside me, and I startle.

"How ought I to know?" I demand. "I wasn't even allowed inside the palace until today."

It is at that moment that Cardan finally enters the room. Ahead of him are two knights of his personal guard, who step away from him once they've escorted him safely to the brugh.

A moment later, Cardan falls. He sprawls across the floor in all his fantastic robes of state, then begins to laugh. He laughs and laughs as though this is the most amazing trick he's ever performed.

He's obviously drunk. Very, very drunk.

My heart falls. When I look over at Nihuar, she is expressionless. Even Locke, staring over from the dance floor, looks discomfited.

Meanwhile, Cardan snatches a lute from the hands of an amazed goblin musician and leaps up onto a long banquet table.

Strumming the strings, he begins a song so vulgar that the entire Court stops their dancing to listen and titter. Then, as one, they join in the madness. The courtiers of Faerie are not shy. They begin to dance again, now to the High King's song.

I didn't even know he could play.

When the song is over, he falls off the table. Landing awkwardly on his side, his crown tilts forward so it's hanging over one of his eyes. His guards rush over to help him up off the floor, but he waves them away. "How is that for an introduction?" he demands of Lord Roiben, although they have in fact met before. "I am no dull monarch."

I look over at Balekin, who is wearing a satisfied smirk. Lord Roiben's face is like stone, unreadable. My gaze goes to Madoc, who watches Cardan with disgust as he fixes his crown.

And yet, grimly, Roiben goes through the motions of what he's come here to do. "Your Majesty, I have come to ask you to allow me vengeance for my people. We were attacked and now we wish to respond." I have seen many

people unable to humble themselves, but Lord Roiben does it with great grace.

And yet, with a look at Cardan, I know it won't matter.

"They say you're a specialist in bloodshed. I suppose you want to show off your skills." Cardan wags a finger in Roiben's direction.

The Unseelie king grimaces at that. A part of him must want to show off *immediately*, but he makes no comment.

"Yet that you must forgo," Cardan says. "I'm afraid you've come a long way for nothing. At least there's wine."

Lord Roiben turns his silvery gaze on me, and there's a threat in them.

This is not going at all the way I hoped.

Cardan waves his hand toward a table of refreshments. The skins of the fruit curl back from the flesh, and a few globes burst, spilling out seeds and startling nearby courtiers. "I've been practicing a skill of my own," he says with a laugh.

I go toward Cardan to try to intercede when Madoc catches my hand. His lip curls. "Is this going according to your plan?" he demands under his breath. "Your puppet is drunk. Get him out of here."

"I'll try," I say.

"I have stood by long enough," Madoc says, his cat eyes staring into mine. "Get your puppet to abdicate the throne in favor of your brother or face the consequences. I won't ask you again. It's now or never."

I pitch my voice low to match his. "After barring me from the palace?"

"You were ill," he returns.

"Working with you will always be working for you," I say. "So, never."

"You would really choose *that* over your own family?" he sneers, his gaze going to Cardan before cutting back to me.

I wince, but no matter how right he is, he's also wrong. "Whether you believe me or not, this *is* for my family," I tell him, and to Cardan I lay my hand on his shoulder, hoping I can guide him out of the room without anything else going wrong.

"Oh ho," he says. "My darling seneschal. Let us take a turn around the room." He grabs me and pulls me toward the dance.

He can barely stand. Three times he stumbles, and three times I have to hold most of his weight to keep him upright.

"Cardan," I hiss. "This is no meet behavior for the High King."

He giggles at that. I think of how serious he was last night in his rooms and how far he seems from that person.

"Cardan," I try again. "You must not do this. I order you to pull yourself together. I command you to drink no more liquor and to attempt sobriety."

“Yes, my sweet villain, my darling god. I will be as sober as a stone carving, just as soon as I can.” And with that, he kisses me on the mouth.

I feel a cacophony of things at once. I am furious with him, furious and resigned that he is a failure as High King, corrupt and fanciful and as weak as Orlagh could have hoped. Then there is the public nature of the kiss, parading this before the Court is shocking, too. He’s never been willing to seem to want me in public. Perhaps he can take it back, but in this moment, it is known.

But there is also a weakness in me, because I dreamed of him kissing me for all my time in the Undersea, and now with his mouth on mine, I want to sink my nails into his back.

His tongue brushes my lower lip, the taste heady and familiar.

Wraithberry.

He’s not drunk; he’s been poisoned.

I pull back and look into his eyes. Those familiar eyes, black, rimmed in gold. His pupils are blown wide.

“Sweet Jude. You are my dearest punishment.” He dances away from me and immediately falls to the ground again, laughing, arms flung wide as though he would embrace the whole room.

I watch in astonished horror.

Someone poisoned him, and he is going to laugh and dance himself to death in front of a Court that will veer between delight and disgust. They will think him ridiculous as his heart stops.

I try to concentrate. Antidotes. There must be one. Water, certainly, to flush the system. Clay. The Bomb would know more. I look around for her, but all I see is the dizzy array of courtiers.

I turn to one of the guards instead. “Get me a pail, a lot of blankets, two pitchers of water, and put them in my rooms. Yes?”

“As you wish,” he says, turning to give orders to the other knights. I turn back to Cardan, who has, predictably, headed in the worst direction possible. He’s walking straight toward the councilors Baphen and Randalin, where they stand with Lord Roiben and his knight, Dulcamara, doubtlessly trying to smooth the situation over.

I can see the faces of the courtiers, the glitter of their eyes as they regard him with a kind of greedy scorn.

They watch as he lifts a carafe of water, tipping it back to cascade over his laughing mouth till he chokes on it.

“Excuse us,” I say, wrapping my arm through his.

Dulcamara greets this with disdain. “We have come all this way to have an audience with the High King. Surely he means to stay longer than this.”

He’s been poisoned. The words are on my tongue when I hear Balekin say them instead. “I fear the High King is not himself. I believe he’s been poisoned.”

And then, too late, I understand the scheme.

“You,” he says to me. “Turn out your pockets. You are the only one here not bound by a vow.”

Had I been truly glamoured, I would have had to pull out the stoppered vial. And once the Court saw it and found wraithberry inside, any protest would come to nothing. Mortals are liars, after all.

“He’s drunk,” I say, and am gratified by Balekin’s shocked expression. “However, you are unbound as well, ambassador. Or, shall I say, not bound to the land.”

“Have I drunk too much? Merely a cup of poison for my breakfast and another for my dinner,” Cardan says.

I give him a look but say no more as I guide the stumbling High King across the floor.

“Where are you taking him?” asks one of the guard. “Your Majesty, do you wish to depart?”

“We all dance at Jude’s command,” he says, and laughs.

“Of course he doesn’t wish to go,” Balekin says. “Attend to your other duties, seneschal, and let me look after my brother. He has duties to perform tonight.”

“You will be sent for if you’re needed,” I tell him, trying to bluff through this. My heart speeds. I am not sure if anyone here would be on my side, if it came to that.

“Jude Duarte, you will leave the High King’s side,” Balekin says.

At that tone, Cardan’s focus narrows. I can see him straining to concentrate. “She will not,” he says.

Since no one can gainsay him, even in this state, I am able to finally lead him out. I bear up the heavy weight of the High King as we move through the passageways of the palace.

CHAPTER 28

The High King's personal guard follows us at a distance. Questions run through my mind—how was he poisoned? Who actually put whatever he drank in his hand? When did it happen?

Grabbing a servant in the hall, I send out runners for the Bomb and, if they are unable to find her, an alchemist.

"You're going to be okay," I say.

"You know," he says, hanging on to me. "That ought to be reassuring. But when mortals say it, it doesn't mean the same thing as when the Folk do, does it? For you, it's an appeal. A kind of hopeful magic. You say I will be well because you fear I won't be."

For a moment, I don't speak. "You're poisoned," I say finally. "You know that, right?"

He doesn't startle. "Ah," he says. "Balekin."

I say nothing, just set him down before the fire in my rooms, his back against my couch. He looks odd there, his beautiful clothes a contrast to the plain rug, his face pale with a hectic flush in his cheeks.

He reaches up and presses my hand to his face. "It's funny, isn't it, how I mocked you for your mortality when you're certain to outlive me."

"You're not going to die," I insist.

"Oh, how many times have I wished that you couldn't lie? Never more than now."

He lolls to one side, and I grab one of the pitchers of water and pour a glass full. I bring it to his lips. "Cardan? Get down as much as you can."

He doesn’t reply and seems about to fall asleep. “No.” I pat his cheek with increasing force until it’s more of a smack. “You’ve got to stay awake.”

His eyes open. His voice is muzzy. “I’ll just sleep for a little while.”

“Unless you want to wind up like Severin of Fairfold, encased in glass for centuries while mortals line up to take pictures with his body, you’re going to stay awake.”

He shifts into a more upright sitting position. “Fine,” he says. “Talk to me.”

“I saw your mother tonight,” I say. “All dressed up. The time I saw her before that was in the Tower of Forgetting.”

“And you’re wondering if I forgot her?” he says airily, and I am pleased that he’s paying enough attention to deliver one of his typical quips.

“Glad you’re up to mocking.”

“I hope it’s the last thing about me to go. So tell me about my mother.”

I try to think of something to say that isn’t entirely negative. I go for carefully neutral. “The first time I met her, I didn’t know who she was. She wanted to trade me some information for getting her out of the Tower. And she was afraid of you.”

“Good,” he says.

My eyebrows go up. “So how did she wind up a part of your Court?”

“I suppose I have some fondness for her yet,” he admits. I pour him some more water, and he drinks it more slowly than I’d like. I refill the glass as soon as I can.

“There are so many questions I wish I could ask my mom,” I admit.

“What would you ask?” The words slur together, but he gets them out.

“Why she married Madoc,” I say, pointing to the glass, which he obediently brings to his mouth. “Whether she loved him and why she left him and whether she was happy in the human world. Whether she actually murdered someone and hid her body in the burnt remains of Madoc’s original stronghold.”

He looks surprised. “I always forget that part of the story.”

I decide a subject change is in order. “Do you have questions like that for your father?”

“Why am I the way I am?” His tone makes it clear he’s proposing something I might suggest he ask, not really wondering about it. “There are no real answers, Jude. Why was I cruel to Folk? Why was I awful to you? Because I could be. Because I liked it. Because, for a moment, when I was at my worst, I felt powerful, and most of the time, I felt powerless, despite being a prince and the son of the High King of Faerie.”

“That’s an answer,” I say.

“Is it?” And then, after a moment. “You should go.”

“Why?” I ask, annoyed. For one, this is my room. For another, I am trying to keep him alive.

He looks at me solemnly. “Because I am going to retch.”

I grab for the bucket, and he takes it from me, his whole body convulsing with the force of vomiting. The contents of his stomach appear like matted leaves, and I shudder. I didn’t know wraithberry did that.

There’s a knock on the door, and I go to it. The Bomb is there, out of breath. I let her in, and she moves past me, straight to Cardan.

“Here,” she says, pulling out a little vial. “It’s clay. It may help draw out and contain the toxins.”

Cardan nods and takes it from her, swallowing the contents with a grimace. “It tastes like dirt.”

“It *is* dirt,” she informs him. “And there’s something else. Two things, really. Grimsen was already gone from his forge when we tried to capture him. We have to assume the worst—that he’s with Orlagh.

“Also, I was given this.” She takes a note from her pocket. “It’s from Balekin. Cannily phrased, but breaks down to this—he’s offering the antidote to you, Jude, if you will bring him the crown.”

“The crown?” Cardan opens his eyes, and I realize he must have closed them without my noticing.

“He wants you to take it to the gardens, near the roses,” the Bomb says.

“What happens if he doesn’t get the antidote?” I ask.

The Bomb puts the back of her hand against Cardan’s cheek. “He’s the High King of Elfhame—he has the strength of the land to draw on. But he’s very weak already. And I don’t think he knows how to do it. Your Majesty?”

He looks at her with benevolent incomprehension. “Whatever do you mean? I just took a *mouthful* of the land at your behest.”

I think about what she’s saying, about what I know of the High King’s powers.

Surely you have noticed that since his reign began, the isles are different. Storms come in faster. Colors are a bit more vivid, smells are sharper.

But all of that was done without trying. I am certain he didn’t notice the land altering itself to better suit him.

Look at them all, your subjects, he’d said to me at a revel months ago. *A shame not a one knows who their true ruler is*.

If Cardan doesn’t believe himself to be the true High King of Elfhame, if he doesn’t allow himself to access his own power, it will be my fault. If wraithberry kills him, it will be because of me.

“I’ll get that antidote,” I say.

Cardan lifts the crown from his head and looks at it for a moment, as though somehow he cannot fathom how it came into his hand. “This can’t pass to Oak if you lose it. Although I admit the succession gets tricky if I die.”

“I already told you,” I say. “You’re not going to die. And I am not going to take that crown.” I go in the back and change around the contents of my pockets. I tie on a cloak with a deep hood and a new mask. I am so furious that my hands shake. Wraithberry, which I was once invulnerable to, thanks to careful mithridatism. If I had been able to keep up the doses, I could have perhaps tricked Balekin as I once tricked Madoc. But after my imprisonment in the Undersea, I have one less advantage and far higher stakes. I have lost my immunity. I am as vulnerable to poison as Cardan.

“You’ll stay with him?” I ask the Bomb, and she nods.

“No,” says Cardan. “She goes with you.”

I shake my head. “The Bomb knows about potions. She knows about magic. She can make sure you don’t get worse.”

He ignores me and takes her hand. “Liliver, as your king, I command you,” he says with great dignity for someone sitting on the floor beside the bucket he’s retched in. “Go with Jude.”

I turn to the Bomb, but I see in her face that she won’t disobey him—she’s made her oath and even given him her name. He’s her king.

“Damn you,” I whisper to one or maybe both of them.

I vow that I will get the antidote swiftly, but that doesn’t make it any easier for me to leave when I know the wraithberry could yet stop his heart. His searing gaze follows us out the door, blown pupils and crown still in his hand.

Balekin is in the garden as he promised, near a blooming tree of silver-blue roses. When I get there, I note figures not too distant from where we stand, other courtiers going for midnight strolls. It means he cannot attack me, but neither can I attack him.

At least not without others knowing about it.

“You are a great disappointment,” he says.

It’s such a shock that I actually laugh. “You mean because I wasn’t glamoured. Yes, I can see how that would be very sad for you.”

He glowers, but he doesn’t even have Vulciber beside him now to threaten me with. Perhaps being an Ambassador to the Undersea makes him believe

he’s untouchable.

All I can think about is that he poisoned Cardan, he tormented me, he pushed Orlagh to raid the land. I am shaking with anger, but trying to bite back that fury so I can get through what must be done.

“Did you bring me the crown?” he asks.

“I’ve got it nearby,” I lie. “But before I hand it over, I want to see the antidote.”

He pulls a vial from his coat, nearly the twin of the one he gave me, which I take out of my pocket. “They would have executed me if they’d found me with this poison,” I say, shaking it. “That’s what you intended, wasn’t it?”

“Someone may execute you yet,” he says.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” I say, taking the stopper out of the bottle. “I am going to take the poison, and then you’re going to give me the antidote. If it works on me, then I’ll bring out the crown and trade it to you for the bottle. If not, then I guess I’ll die, but the crown will be lost forever. Whether Cardan lives or dies, that crown is hidden well enough to be lost for decades.”

“Grimsen can forge me another,” Balekin says.

“If that’s true, then what are we here for?”

Balekin grimaces, and I consider the possibility that the little smith isn’t with Orlagh after all. Maybe he’s disappeared after doing his best to set us at one another’s throats. Maybe there’s no crown but this one.

“You stole that crown from me,” he says.

“True enough,” I admit. “And I’ll hand it over to you, but not for nothing.”

“I can’t lie, mortal. If I say I will give you the antidote, I will do it. My word is enough.”

I give him my best scowl. “Everyone knows to beware when bargaining with the Folk. You deceive with your every breath. If you truly have the antidote, what does it harm you to let me poison myself? I would think it would be a pleasure.”

He gives me a searching look. I imagine he’s angry that I am not glamoured. He must have had to scramble when I hustled Cardan out of the throne room. Was he always ready with the antidote? Did he think he could persuade Cardan to crown him that way? Was he arrogant enough to believe that the Council wouldn’t have stood in his way?

“Very well,” he says. “One dose for you, and the rest for Cardan.”

I unstopper the bottle he gave me and toss it back, drinking all the contents with a pronounced wince. I am angry all over again, thinking of how sick I made myself taking tiny doses of poison. All for nothing.

“Do you feel the wraithberry working on your blood? It will work far faster on you than on one of us. And you took such a large dose.” He watches

me with such a fierce expression that I can tell he wishes he could leave me to die. If he could justify walking away right now, he would. For a moment, I think he might.

Then he crosses toward me and unstoppers the bottle in his own hand. “Please do not believe that I will put it into your hand,” he says. “Open your mouth like a little bird, and I will drop in your dose. Then you will give me the crown.”

I open my mouth obediently and let him pour the thick, bitter, honey-like stuff onto my tongue. I duck away from him, returning the distance between us, making sure I am closer to the entrance of the palace.

“Satisfied?” he asks.

I spit the antidote into the glass bottle, the one he gave me, the one that once contained wraithberry, but until a few moments before, was filled only with water.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

I stopper it again and toss it through the air to the Bomb, who catches it handily. Then she is gone, leaving him to gape at me.

“What have you done?” he demands.

“I tricked you,” I tell him. “A bit of misdirection. I dumped out your poison and washed out the vial. As you keep forgetting, I grew up here and so am also dangerous to bargain with—and, as you see, I *can* lie. And, like you reminded me so long ago, I am short on time.”

He draws the sword at his side. It’s a thin, long blade. I don’t think it’s the one he used to fight Cardan in his tower room, but it might be.

“We’re in public,” I remind him. “And I am still the High King’s senseschal.”

He looks around, taking in the sight of the other courtiers nearby. “Leave us,” he shouts at them. A thing it did not occur to me that anyone could do, but he is used to being a prince. He is used to being obeyed.

And indeed, the courtiers seem to melt into the shadows, clearing the room for the sort of duel we definitely ought not to have. I slip my hand into my pocket, touching the hilt of a knife. The range on it is nothing like a sword. As Madoc explained more than once: *A sword is a weapon of war, a dagger is a weapon of murder*. I’d rather have the knife than be unarmed, but more than anything, I wish I had Nightfell.

“Are you suggesting a duel?” I ask. “I am sure you wouldn’t want to bring dishonor to your name with me so outmatched in weaponry.”

“You expect me to believe you have any honor?” he asks, which is, unfortunately, a fair point. “You are a coward. A coward like the man who raised you.”

He takes a step toward me, ready to cut me down whether I have a weapon or not.

"Madoc?" I draw my knife. It's not small, but it's still less than half the length of the blade he is leveling at me.

"It was Madoc's plan that we should strike during the coronation. It was his plan that once Dain was out of the way, Eldred would see clear to put the crown on my head. It was all his plan, but he stayed Grand General and I went to the Tower of Forgetting. And did he lift a finger to help me? He did not. He bent his head to my brother, whom he despises. And you're just like him, willing to beg and grovel and lower yourself for anyone if it gets you power."

I doubt putting Balekin on the throne was ever part of Madoc's true plan, whatever he allowed Balekin to believe, but that doesn't make his words sting any less. I have spent a lifetime making myself small in the hopes I could find an acceptable place in Elfhame, and then, when I pulled off the biggest, grandest coup imaginable, I had to hide my abilities more than ever.

"No," I say. "That's not true."

He looks surprised. Even in the Tower of Forgetting, when he was a prisoner, I still *let* Vulciber strike me. In the Undersea, I pretended to having no dignity at all. Why should he think I see myself any differently than he sees me?

"You are the one who bent your head to Orlagh instead of to your own brother," I say. "You're the coward and a traitor. A murderer of your own kin. But worse than all that, you're a fool."

He bares his teeth as he advances on me, and I, who have been pretending to subservience, remember my most troublesome talent: pissing off the Folk.

"Go ahead," he says. "Run like the coward you are."

I take a step back.

Kill Prince Balekin. I think of Dulcamara's words, but I don't hear her voice. I hear my own, rough with sea water, terrified and cold and alone.

Madoc's words of long ago come back to me. *What is sparring but a game of strategy, played at speed*?

The point of a fight is not to have a good fight, it's to win.

I am at a disadvantage against a sword, a bad disadvantage. And I am still weak from my time in the Undersea. Balekin can hang back and take his time while I can't get past the blade. He will take me apart slowly, cut by cut. My best bet is closing the distance fast. I need to get inside his guard, and I don't have the luxury of taking his measure before I do it. I am going to have to rush him.

I have one shot to get this right.

My heart thunders in my ears.

He lunges toward me, and I slam my knife against the base of his sword with my right hand then grab his forearm with my left, twisting as though to disarm him. He pulls against my grip. I drive the knife toward his neck.

“Hold,” Balekin shouts. “I surr—”

Arterial blood sprays my arm, sprays the grass. It glistens on my knife. Balekin slumps over, sprawling on the ground.

It all happens so fast.

It happens too fast.

I want to have some reaction. I want to tremble or feel nauseated. I want to be the person who begins to weep. I want to be anyone but the person I am, who looks around to be sure no one saw, who wipes off my knife in the dirt, wipes off my hand on his clothes and gets out of there before the guards come.

You’re a good little murderer, Dulcamara said.

When I look back, Balekin’s eyes are still open, staring at nothing.

When I return, Cardan is sitting on the couch. The bucket is gone and so is the Bomb.

He looks at me with a lazy smile. “Your dress. You put it back on.”

I look at him in confusion, the consequences of what I’ve just done—including having to tell Cardan—are hard to think past. But the dress I am wearing is the one I wore before, the one I got from Mother Marrow’s walnut. There’s blood on one sleeve of it now, but it is otherwise the same.

“Did something happen?” I ask again.

“I don’t know?” he asks, puzzled. “Did it? I granted the boon you wanted. Is your father safe?”

Boon?

My father?

Madoc. Of course. Madoc threatened me, Madoc was disgusted by Cardan. But what has he done and what has it to do with dresses?

“Cardan,” I say, trying to be as calm as I can. I go over to the sofa and sit down. It’s not a small couch, but his long legs are on it, blanketed and propped up on pillows. No matter how far from him I sit, it feels too close. “You’ve got to tell me what happened. I haven’t been here for the last hour.”

His expression grows troubled.

“The Bomb came back with the antidote,” he says. “She said you’d be right behind her. I was still so dizzy, and then a guard came, saying that there was an emergency. She went to see. And then *you* came in, just like she said you would. You said you had a plan.…”

He looks at me, as though waiting for me to jump in and tell the rest of the story, the part I remember. But, of course, I don’t.

After a moment, he closes his eyes and shakes his head. “Taryn.”

“I don’t understand,” I say, because I don’t want to understand.

“Your plan was that your father was going to take half the army, but for him to function independently, he needed to be freed of his vows to the crown. You had on one of your doublets—the ones you always wear. And these odd earrings. Moons and stars.” He shakes his head.

A cold chill goes through me.

As children in the mortal world, Taryn and I would switch places to play tricks on our mother. Even in Faerie, we would sometimes pretend to be each other to see what we could get away with. Would a lecturer be able to tell the difference? Could Oriana? Madoc? Oak? What about the great and mighty Prince Cardan?

“But how did she make you agree?” I demand. “She has no power. She could pretend to be me, but she couldn’t force you—”

He puts his head in his long-fingered hands. “She didn’t have to command me, Jude. She didn’t have to use any magic. I trust you. I trusted you.”

And I trusted Taryn.

While I was murdering Balekin, while Cardan was poisoned and disoriented, Madoc made his move against the crown. Against me. And he did it with his daughter Taryn by his side.

CHAPTER 29

The High King is restored to his own chamber so he may rest. I feed my bloodstained dress to the fire, put on a robe, and plan. If none of the courtiers saw my face before Balekin sent them away, then wrapped in my cloak, I might not have been identified. And, of course, I can lie. But the question of how to avoid blame for the murder of the Undersea's ambassador pales beside the question of what to do about Madoc.

With half of the army gone along with the general, if Orlagh decides to strike, I have no idea how to repel her. Cardan will have to choose another Grand General and quickly.

And he will have to inform the lower Courts of Madoc's defection, to make sure it is known he doesn't speak with the voice of the High King. There must be a way to drive him back to the High Court. He is proud but practical. Perhaps the answer lies in something to do with Oak. Perhaps it means I ought to make my hopes for Oak's rule less opaque. But all that depends on his not being seen as a traitor, although he is one. I am thinking over all this when a knock comes to my door.

Outside, a messenger, a lilac-skinned girl in royal livery. "The High King requires your presence. I am to conduct you to his chambers."

I take an unsteady breath. No one else might have seen me, but Cardan cannot fail to guess. He knows whom I went to meet and how late I returned from that meeting. He saw the blood on my sleeve. *You command the High King, not the other way around,* I remind myself, but the reminder feels hollow.

“Let me change,” I say.

The messenger shakes her head. “The king made it clear I was to ask you to come at once.”

When I get to the royal chambers, I find Cardan alone, dressed simply, sitting in a throne-like chair. He looks wan, and his eyes still shine a bit too much, as though maybe poison lingers in his blood.

“Please,” he says. “Sit.”

Warily, I do.

“Once, you had a proposal for me,” he says. “Now I have one for you. Give me back my will. Give me back my freedom.”

I suck in a breath. I’m surprised, although I guess I shouldn’t be. No one wants to be under the control of another person, although the balance of power between us, in my view, has careened back and forth, despite his vow. My having command of him has felt like balancing a knife on its point, nearly impossible and probably dangerous. To give it up would mean giving up any semblance of power. It would be giving up *everything*. “You know I won’t do that.”

He doesn’t seem particularly put off by my refusal. “Hear me out. What you want from me is obedience for longer than a year and a day. More than half your time is gone. Are you ready to put Oak on the throne?”

I don’t speak for a moment, hoping he might think his question was rhetorical. When it becomes clear that’s not the case, I shake my head.

“And so you thought to extend my vow. Just how were you imagining doing that?”

Again, I have no answer. Certainly no good one.

It’s his turn to smile. “You thought I had nothing to bargain with.”

Underestimating him is a problem I’ve had before, and I fear will have again. “What bargain is possible?” I ask. “When what I want is for you to make the vow again, for at least another year, if not a decade, and what you want is for me to rescind the vow entirely?”

“Your father and sister tricked me,” Cardan says. “If Taryn had given me a command, I would have known it wasn’t you. But I was sick and tired and didn’t want to refuse you. I didn’t even ask why, Jude. I wanted to show you that you could trust me, that you didn’t need to give me orders for me to do things. I wanted to show you that I believed you’d thought it all through. But that’s no way to rule. And it’s not really even trust, when someone can order you to do it anyway.

“Faerie suffered with us at each other’s throats. You attempted to make me do what you thought needed to be done, and if we disagreed, we could do nothing but manipulate each other. That wasn’t working, but simply giving in

is no solution. We cannot continue like this. Tonight is proof of that. I need to make my own decisions."

"You said you didn't mind so much, listening to my orders." It's a paltry attempt at humor, and he doesn't smile.

Instead, he looks away, as though he can't quite meet my eyes. "All the more reason not to allow myself that luxury. You made me the High King, Jude. Let me *be* the High King."

I fold my arms protectively over my chest. "And what will I be? Your servant?" I hate that he's making sense, because there is no way I can give him what he's asking. I can't step aside, not with Madoc out there, not with so many threats. And yet I cannot help recalling what the Bomb said about Cardan's not knowing how to invoke his connection to the land. Or what the Roach said, about Cardan's thinking of himself as a spy pretending to be a monarch.

"Marry me," he says. "Become the Queen of Elfhame."

I feel a kind of cold shock come over me, as though someone has told a particularly cruel joke, with me its target. As though someone looked into my heart and saw the most ridiculous, most childish desire there and used it against me. "But you can't."

"I *can*," he says. "Kings and queens don't often marry for something other than a political alliance, true, but consider this a version of that. And were you queen, you wouldn't need my obedience. You could issue all your own orders. And I would be free."

I can't help thinking of how mere months ago I fought for a place in the Court, hoping desperately for knighthood and didn't even get that.

The irony that it's Cardan, who insisted that I didn't belong in Faerie at all, offering me *this* makes it all the more shocking.

He goes on. "Moreover, since you plan on forcing me into abdicating for your brother, it's not as though we'd be married forever. Marriages between kings and queens must last as long as they rule, but in our case, that's not so long. You could have everything you want at the price of merely releasing me from my vow of obedience."

My heart is pounding so hard that I fear it will stutter to a stop.

"You're serious?" I manage.

"Of course I am. In earnest as well."

I look for the trick, because this must be one of those faerie bargains that sound like one thing but turn out to be something very different. "So let me guess, you want me to release you from your vow for your promise to marry me? But then the marriage will take place in the month of never when the moon rises in the west and the tides flow backward."

He shakes his head, laughing. “If you agree, I will marry you tonight,” he says. “Now, even. Right here. We exchange vows, and it is done. This is no mortal marriage, to require being presided over and witnessed. I cannot lie. I cannot deny you.”

“It’s not long until your vow is up,” I say, because the idea of taking what he’s offering—the idea that I could not only be part of the Court, but the head of it—is so tempting that it’s hard to believe it might not be a trap. “Surely the idea of a few more months tied to me can’t be such a hardship that you’d like to tie yourself to me for years.”

“As I said before, a lot can happen in a year and a day. Much has happened in half that time.”

We sit silently for a moment as I try to think. For the last seven months, the question of what would happen after a year and a day has haunted me. This is a *solution*, but it doesn’t feel at all practical. It’s the stuff of absurd daydream, imagined while dozing in a mossy glen, too embarrassing to even confess to my sisters.

Mortal girls do not become queens of Faerieland.

I imagine what it would be like to have my own crown, my own power. Maybe I wouldn’t have to be afraid to love him. Maybe it would be okay. Maybe I wouldn’t have to be scared of all the things I’ve been scared of my whole life, of being diminished and weak and lesser. Maybe I would become a little bit magic.

“Yes,” I say, but my voice fails me. It comes out all breath. “Yes.”

He leans forward in the chair, eyebrows raised, but he doesn’t wear his usual arrogant mien. I cannot read his expression. “To what are you agreeing?”

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll do it. I’ll marry you.”

He gives me a wicked grin. “I had no idea it would be such a sacrifice.”

Frustrated, I flop over on the couch. “That’s not what I mean.”

“Marriage to the High King of Elfhame is largely thought to be a prize, a honor of which few are worthy.”

I suppose his sincerity could last but only so long. I roll my eyes, grateful that he’s acting like himself again, so I can better pretend not to be overawed by what’s about to happen. “So what do we do?”

I think of Taryn’s wedding and the part of the ceremony we did not witness. I think of my mother’s wedding, too, the vows she must have made to Madoc, and abruptly a shiver goes through me that I hope has nothing to do with premonition.

“It’s simple,” he says, moving to the edge of the chair. “We pledge our troth. I’ll go first—unless you wish to wait. Perhaps you imagined something

more romantic."

"No," I say quickly, unwilling to admit to imagining anything to do with marriage at all.

He slides my ruby ring off his finger. "I, Cardan, son of Eldred, High King of Elfhame, take you, Jude Duarte, mortal ward of Madoc, to be my bride and my queen. Let us be wed until we wish for it to be otherwise and the crown has passed from our hands."

As he speaks, I begin to tremble with something between hope and fear. The words he's saying are so momentous that they're surreal, especially here, in Eldred's own rooms. Time seems to stretch out. Above us, the branches begin to bud, as though the land itself heard the words he spoke.

Catching my hand, he slides the ring on. The exchange of rings is not a faerie ritual, and I am surprised by it.

"Your turn," he says into the silence. He gives me a grin. "I'm trusting you to keep your word and release me from my bond of obedience after this."

I smile back, which maybe makes up for the way that I froze after he finished speaking. I still can't quite believe this is happening. My hand tightens on his as I speak. "I, Jude Duarte, take Cardan, High King of Elfhame, to be my husband. Let us be wed until we don't want to be and the crown has passed from our hands."

He kisses the scar of my palm.

I still have his brother's blood under my fingernails.

I don't have a ring for him.

Above us, the buds are blooming. The whole room smells of flowers.

Drawing back, I speak again, pushing away all thoughts of Balekin, of the future in which I am going to have to tell him what I've done. "Cardan, son of Eldred, High King of Elfhame, I forsake any command over you. You are free of your vow of obedience, for now and for always."

He lets out a breath and stands a bit unsteadily. I can't quite wrap my head around the idea that I am… I can't even think the words. Too much has happened tonight.

"You look as if you've barely rested." I rise to be sure that if he falls over, I can grab for him before he hits the floor, although I am not so sure of myself, either.

"I will lie down," he says, letting me guide him toward his enormous bed. Once there, he does not let go of my hand. "If you lie with me."

With no reason to object, I do, the sense of unreality heightening. As I stretch out on the elaborately embroidered comforter, I realize that I have found something far more blasphemous than spreading out on the bed of the High King, far more blasphemous than sneaking Cardan's signet onto my

finger, or even sitting on the throne itself.

I have become the Queen of Faerie.

We trade kisses in the darkness, blurred by exhaustion. I don't expect to sleep, but I do, my limbs tangled with his, the first restful sleep I've had since my return from the Undersea. When I am awakened, it is to a banging on the door.

Cardan is already up, playing with the vial of clay the Bomb brought, tossing it from hand to hand. Still dressed, his rumpled aspect gives him only an air of dissipation. I pull my robe more tightly around me. I am embarrassed to be so obviously sharing his bed.

"Your Majesty," says the messenger—a knight, from the clipped, official sound of him. "Your brother is dead. There was a duel, from what we've been able to determine."

"Ah," Cardan says.

"And the Queen of the Undersea." The knight's voice trembles. "She's here, demanding justice for her ambassador."

"I just bet she is." Cardan's voice is dry, clipped. "Well, we can hardly keep her waiting. You. What's your name?"

The knight hesitates. "Rannoch, Your Majesty."

"Well, Sir Rannoch, I expect you to assemble a group of knights to escort me to the water. You will wait in the courtyard. Will you do that for me?"

"But the general…" he begins.

"Is not here right now," Cardan finishes for him.

"I will do it," the knight says. I hear the door close, and Cardan rounds the corner, expression haughty.

"Well, wife," he says to me, a chill in his voice. "It seems you have kept at least one secret from your dowry. Come, we must dress for our first audience together."

And so I am left to rush through the halls in my robe. Back in my rooms, I call for my sword and throw on my velvets, all the while wondering what it will mean to have this newfound status and what Cardan will do now that he is unchecked.

CHAPTER 30

Orlagh waits for us in a choppy ocean, accompanied by her daughter and a pod of knights mounted on seals and sharks and all manner of sharp-toothed sea creatures. She, herself, sits on an orca and is dressed as though ready for battle. Her skin is covered in shiny silvery scales that seem both to be metallic and to have grown from her skin. A helmet of bone and teeth hides her hair.

Nicasia is beside her, on a shark. She has no tail today, her long legs covered in armor of shell and bone.

All along the edge of the beach are clumps of kelp, washed up as though from a storm. I think I see other things out in the water. The back of a large creature swimming just below the waves. The hair of drowned mortals, blowing like sea grass. The Undersea's forces are larger than they seem at first glance.

"Where is my ambassador?" Orlagh demands. "Where is your brother?"

Cardan is seated on his gray steed, in black clothes and a cloak of scarlet. Beside him are two dozen mounted knights and both Mikkel and Nihuar. On the ride over, they tried to determine what Cardan had planned, but he has kept his own counsel from them and, more troublingly, from me. Since hearing of the death of Balekin, he's said little and avoided looking in my direction. My stomach churns with anxiety.

He looks at Orlagh with a coldness that I know from experience comes from either fury or fear. In this case, possibly both. "As you well know, he's dead."

"It was your responsibility to keep him safe," she says.

“Was it?” Cardan asks with exaggerated astonishment, touching his hand to his breast. “I thought my obligation was not to move against him, not to keep him from the consequences of his own risk taking. He had a little duel, from what I hear. Dueling, as I am sure you know, is dangerous. But I neither murdered him nor did I encourage it. In fact, I quite *dis*couraged it.”

I attempt to not let anything I am feeling show on my face.

Orlagh leans forward as though she senses blood in the water. “You ought not to allow such disobedience.”

Cardan shrugs nonchalantly. “Perhaps.”

Mikkel shifts on his horse. He’s clearly uncomfortable with the way Cardan is speaking, carelessly, as though they are merely having a friendly conversation and Orlagh hasn’t come to chisel away his power, to weaken his rule. And if she knew Madoc was gone, she might attack outright.

Looking at her, looking at Nicasia’s sneer and the selkies and merfolk’s strange, wet eyes, I feel powerless. I have given up command of Cardan, and for it, I have his vow of marriage. But without anyone’s knowing, it seems less and less as though it ever happened.

“I am here to demand justice. Balekin was my ambassador, and if you don’t consider him to be under your protection, I do consider him to be under mine. You must give his murderer to the sea, where she will find no forgiveness. Give us your seneschal, Jude Duarte.”

For a moment, I feel as though I can’t breathe. It’s as though I am drowning again.

Cardan’s eyebrows go up. His voice stays light. “But she’s only just returned from the sea.”

“So you don’t dispute her crime?” asks Orlagh.

“Why should I?” asks Cardan. “If she’s the one with whom he dueled, I am certain she would win; my brother supposed himself expert with the sword—a great exaggeration of abilities. But she’s mine to punish or not, as I see fit.”

I hate hearing myself spoken of as though I am not *right there* when I have his pledge of troth. But a queen killing an ambassador does seem like a potential political problem.

Orlagh’s gaze doesn’t go to me. I doubt very much she cares about anything but that Cardan gave up a lot for my return and by threatening me, she believes she can get more. “King of the land, I am not here to fight your sharp tongue. My blood is cold and I prefer blades. Once, I considered you as a partner for my daughter, the most precious thing in the sea. She would have brokered a true peace between us.”

Cardan looks at Nicasia, and although Orlagh leaves him an opening, for a

long moment, he does not speak. And when he does, he only says, “Like you, I am not so good with forgiveness.”

Something in Queen Orlagh’s manner changes. “If it’s war you want, you would be unwise to declare it on an island.” Around her, waves grow more violent, their white caps of froth larger. Whirlpools form just off the edge of the land, small ones, deepening, only to spin themselves out as new ones form.

“War?” He peers at her as though she’s said something particularly puzzling and it vexes him. “Do you mean for me to really believe you want to fight? Are *you* challenging me to a duel?”

He’s obviously baiting her, but I cannot imagine to what benefit.

“And if I was?” she asks. “What then, boy?”

The smile that curves his lip is voluptuous. “Beneath every bit of your sea is land. Seething, volcanic land. Go against me, and I will show you what this boy will do, my lady.”

He stretches out his hand, and something seems to rise to the top of the water around us, like a pale scrum. Sand. Floating sand.

Then, all around the Court of the Undersea, water begins to churn.

I stare at him, hoping to catch his eye, but he is concentrating. Whatever magic he is doing, this is what Baphen meant when he said the High King was tied to the land, was the beating heart and the star upon whom Elfhame’s future was written. This is power. And to see Cardan wield it is to understand just how inhuman he is, how transformed, how far outside my control he’s moved.

“What is this?” Orlagh asks as the churning turns to boiling. An oblong of bubbling and seething ocean as the Folk of the Undersea scream and scatter, swimming out of range of whatever is happening. Several seals come up on the black rocks near the land, calling to one another in their language.

Nicasia’s shark is spun sideways, and she plunges into the water.

Steam billows up from the waves, blowing hot. A huge white cloud rolls across my vision. When it clears, I can see that new earth has coalesced from the depths, hot stone cooling as we watch.

With Nicasia standing on it, her expression half amazement and half terror. “Cardan,” she calls.

He’s facing her, and one corner of his mouth is turned up in a little smile, but his gaze is unfocused. He believed that he needed to convince Orlagh that he wasn’t feckless.

Now I see he’s come up with a plan to do that. Just as he came up with a plan to throw off the yoke of my control.

During my month in the Undersea, he changed. He began scheming

schemes. And he has become disturbingly effective at them.

I am thinking of that as I watch grass grow between Nicasia's toes and wildflowers spring up all along the gently rising hills, as I notice the trees and brambles sprout, and as the trunk of a tree begins to form around Nicasia's body.

"Cardan!" she screams as bark wraps around her, closing over her waist.

"What have you done?" Orlagh cries as the bark moves higher, as branches unfold, budding with leaves and fragrant blossoms. Petals blow out onto the waves.

"Will you flood the land now?" Cardan asks Orlagh with perfect calm, as though he didn't just cause a fourth island to rise from the sea. "Send salt water to corrupt the roots of our trees and make our streams and lakes brackish? Will you drown our berries and send your merfolk to slit our throats and steal our roses? Will you do it if it means your daughter will suffer the same? Come, I dare you."

"Release Nicasia," says Orlagh, defeat heavy in her voice.

"I am the High King of Elfhame," Cardan reminds her. "And I mislike being given orders. You attacked the land. You stole my seneschal and freed my brother, who was imprisoned for the murder of our father, Eldred, with whom you had an alliance. Once, we respected each other's territory.

"I have allowed you too much disrespect, and you have overplayed your hand.

"Now, Queen of the Undersea, we will have a truce as you had with Eldred, as you had with Mab. We will have a truce or we will have a war, and if we fight, I will be unsparing. Nothing and no one you love will be safe."

"Very well, High King," Orlagh says, and I suck in my breath, not at all sure what will come next. "Let us have an alliance and no longer be at one another's throats. Give me my daughter, and we will go."

I let out a breath. He was wise to push her, even though it was terrifying. After all, once she found out about Madoc, she might press her advantage. Better to bring this moment to its crisis.

And it worked. I look down to hide my smile.

"Let Nicasia stay here and be your ambassador in Balekin's stead," Cardan says. "She has grown up on these islands, and many who love her are here."

That wipes the smile off my face. On the new island, the bark is pulling away from Nicasia's skin. I wonder what he's playing at, bringing her back to Elfhame. With her will inevitably come trouble.

And yet, maybe it's the sort of trouble he wants.

"If she wishes to stay, she may. Are you satisfied?" Orlagh asks.

Cardan inclines his head. "I am. I will not be led by the sea, no matter how

great its queen. As the High King, I must lead. But I must also be just."

Here he pauses. And then he turns to me. "And today I will dispense justice. Jude Duarte, do you deny you murdered Prince Balekin, Ambassador of the Undersea and brother to the High King?"

I am not sure what he wants me to say. Would it help to deny it? If so, surely he would not put it to me in such a way—a way that makes it clear he believes I did kill Balekin. Cardan has had a plan all along. All I can do is trust that he has a plan now.

"I do not deny that we had a duel and that I won it," I say, my voice coming out more uncertain than I'd like.

All the eyes of the Folk are on me, and for a moment, as I look out at their pitiless faces, I feel Madoc's absence keenly. Orlagh's smile is full of sharp teeth.

"Hear my judgment," Cardan says, authority ringing in his voice. "I hereafter exile Jude Duarte to the mortal world until such time as she is pardoned by the crown. Until then, let her not step one foot in Faerie or forfeit her life."

I gasp. "But you can't do that!"

He looks at me for a long moment, but his gaze is mild, as though he's expecting me to be fine with exile. As though I am nothing more than one of his petitioners. As though I am nothing at all. "Of course I can," he replies.

"But I'm the Queen of Faerie," I shout, and for a moment, there is silence. Then everyone around me begins to laugh.

I can feel my cheeks heat. Tears of frustration and fury prick my eyes as, a beat too late, Cardan laughs with them.

At that moment, knights clap their hands on my wrists. Sir Rannoch pulls me down from the horse. For a mad moment I consider fighting him as though two dozen knights aren't around us.

"Deny it then," I yell. "Deny me!"

He cannot, of course, so he does not. Our eyes meet, and the odd smile on his face is clearly meant for me. I remember what it was to hate him with the whole of my heart, but I've remembered too late.

"Come with me, my lady," Sir Rannoch says, and there is nothing I can do but go.

Still, I cannot resist looking back. When I do, Cardan is taking the first step onto the new island. He looks every bit the ruler his father was, every bit the monster his brother wanted to become. Crow-black hair blown back from his face, scarlet cape swirling around him, eyes reflecting the flat gray emptiness of the sky.

"If Insweal is the Isle of Woe, Insmire, the Isle of Might, and Insmoor the

Isle of Stone," he says, his voice carrying across the newly formed land. "Then let this be Insear, Isle of Ash."

EPILOGUE

I lie on the couch in front of the television. In front of me a plate of microwaved fish sticks grows cold. On the screen in front of me, a cartoon ice-skater is sulking. He is not a very good skater, I think. Or maybe he's a great skater. I keep forgetting to read the subtitles.

It's hard to concentrate on pretty much anything these days.

Vivi comes into the room and flops down on the couch. "Heather won't text me back," she says.

I turned up on Vivi's doorstep a week before, exhausted, my eyes red with weeping. Rannoch and his coterie had carried me across the sky on one of their horses and dumped me on a random street in a random town. I'd walked and walked until I had blisters on my feet, and I began to doubt my ability to navigate by the stars. Finally, I stumbled into a gas station with a taxi refueling and was startled to remember taxis existed. By then, I didn't care that I had no money with me and that Vivi was probably going to pay him with a handful of glamoured leaves.

But I didn't expect to arrive and find Heather gone.

When she and Vivi came back from Faerie, I guess she had a lot of questions. And then she'd had *more* questions, and finally, Vivi admitted glamouring her. That's when everything totally unraveled.

Vivi removed the glamour, Heather got her memories back. Heather moved out.

She's sleeping at her parents' house, so Vivi keeps hoping she might still come back. Some of her stuff is still here. Clothes. Her drafting table. A set of

unused oil paints.

“She’ll text you when she’s ready,” I say, although I am not sure I believe it. “She’s just trying to get her head straight.” Just because I am bitter about romance doesn’t mean everyone else needs to be.

For a while, we just sit on the couch together, watching the cartoon skater fail to land jumps and fall in helpless and probably unrequited love with his coach.

Soon, Oak will come home from school, and we will pretend that things are normal. I will take him into the wooded part of the apartment complex and drill him on the sword. He doesn’t mind, but to him it’s only messing around, and I don’t have the heart to scare him into seeing swordplay differently.

Vivi takes a fish stick off my plate and dredges it through the ketchup. “How long you going to keep sulking? You were exhausted from being locked up in the Undersea. You were off your game. He got one over on you. It happens.”

“Whatever,” I say as she eats my food.

“If you hadn’t gotten captured, you would have mopped the floor with him.”

I am not even sure what that means, but it’s nice to hear.

“I’m glad you’re here.” She turns to me with her cat eyes, eyes just like her father. “I wanted you to come to the mortal world and stay. Maybe you will. Maybe you’ll love it. I want you to give it a chance.”

I nod noncommittally.

“And if you don’t love it,” she says, lifting an eyebrow. “You can always join Madoc.”

“I can’t,” I say. “He tried and tried to recruit me, but I kept turning him down. That ship sailed.”

She shrugs. “He wouldn’t—okay, he *would* care. He’d make you grovel a lot, and he’d bring it up awkwardly in war councils for the next couple of decades. But he’d take you.”

I give her a stern look. “And what? Work to put Oak on the throne?”

“Who cares about that? Work to hurt Cardan,” Vivi says, with a fierce light in her eyes. She has never been particularly forgiving.

Right now, I am glad of it.

“How?” I say, but the strategic part of my brain is grinding slowly back into action. Grimsen is still in play. If he could make a crown for Balekin, what could he do for me?

“I don’t know, but don’t worry about it yet,” Vivi says, getting up. “Revenge is sweet, but ice cream is sweeter.” She goes to the freezer and removes a tub of mint chocolate chip. She brings that and two spoons back to

the sofa. “For now, accept this delight, unworthy though it is for the Queen of Faerie in exile.”

I know she doesn’t mean to mock me, but the title stings anyway. I pick up my spoon.

You must be strong enough to strike and strike and strike again without tiring. The first lesson is to make yourself that strong.

We eat bathed in the flickering light of the screen. Vivi’s phone is silent on the coffee table. My mind is whirling.

The Folk of the Air series

The Cruel Prince
The Wicked King
The Queen of Nothing

Looking for the latest news on your favorite YA authors?
Want early access to new books and the chance to win advance copies?
Bring the (book) party to your in-box with the NOVL e-newsletter:
theNOVL.com/enewsletter

Join the NOVL community:
theNOVL.com
Twitter.com/TheNovl
Instagram.com/TheNovl
Facebook.com/TheNovl

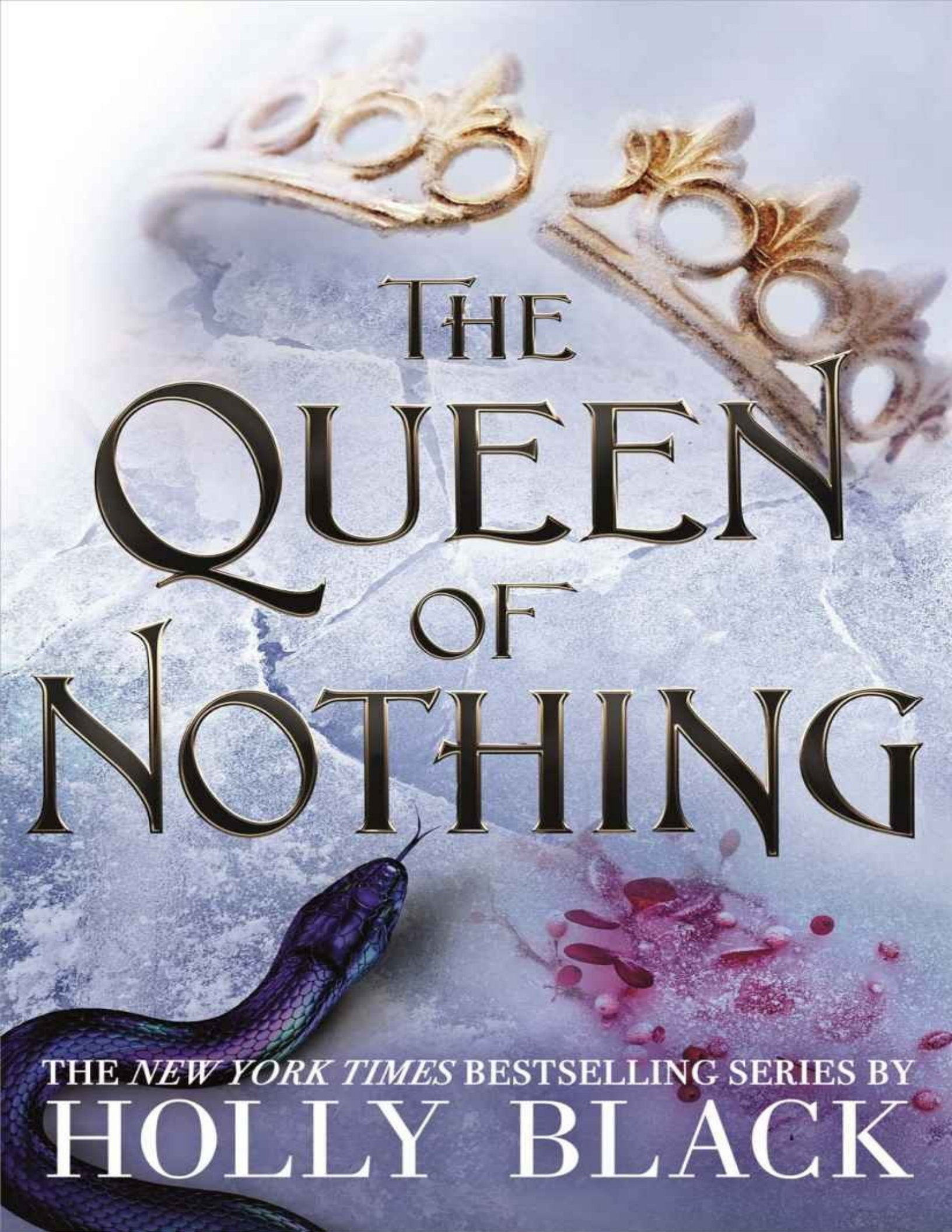
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Getting through the second book in this series would have been a lot harder without the support, encouragement, and critiscm of Sarah Rees Brennan, Leigh Bardugo, Steve Berman, Cassandra Clare, Maureen Johnson, Kelly Link, and Robin Wasserman. Thank you, my rakish crew!

Thank you to the readers who came out to see me on the road, and those who contacted me to tell me how much they liked *The Cruel Prince*, and for all the character art.

A massive thank-you to everyone at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, who have supported my weird vision. Thanks especially to my amazing editor, Alvina Ling, and to Kheryn Callender, Siena Koncsol, Victoria Stapleton, Jennifer McClelland-Smith, Emilie Polster, Allegra Green, and Elena Yip, among others. And in the UK, thank you to Hot Key Books, particularly Jane Harris, Emma Matthewson, and Tina Mories.

Thank you to Joanna Volpe, Hilary Pecheone, Pouya Shahbazian, and everyone at New Leaf Literary for making hard things easier.


THE QUEEN OF NOTHING
THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES BY
HOLLY BLACK

The Queen of Nothing

HOLLY BLACK

Contents

Title Page
Praise for THE FOLK OF THE AIR series
The Folk of the Air series
Dedication
Map

Book One
- Prologue
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16

Book Two
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19

Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27

Epilogue
Acknowledgements
Copyright

Praise for THE FOLK OF THE AIR series

‘Brilliantly enjoyable … Definitely Holly Black’s best so far.’

Amanda Craig

‘An enticing world that’s as sinister as it is appealing … Shadowhunters fans should read this at their earliest opportunity.’

SciFi Now magazine

‘A veritable queen of dark fantasy, Holly Black spins a thrilling tale of intrigue and magic … Unmissable for fans of Sarah J. Mass and the Grisha trilogy.’

Buzzfeed UK

‘Whatever a reader is looking for – heart-in-throat action, deadly romance, double-crossing, moral complexity – this is one heck of a ride.’

Booklist

‘Complex, nuanced characters, frank sensuality and thorn-sharp, intricate storytelling all conspire to ensnare.’

Guardian

‘Lush, dangerous, a dark jewel of a book … This delicious story will seduce you and leave you desperate for just one more page.’

Leigh Bardugo, No. 1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*

‘Holly Black is the Faerie Queen.’

Victoria Aveyard

‘A lush, immersive experience … where little is what it seems.’

Books for Keeps

‘This tale of a kingdom and deadly power struggles as seen through human eyes is an absolute must-read.’

Irish Independent

The Folk of the Air series

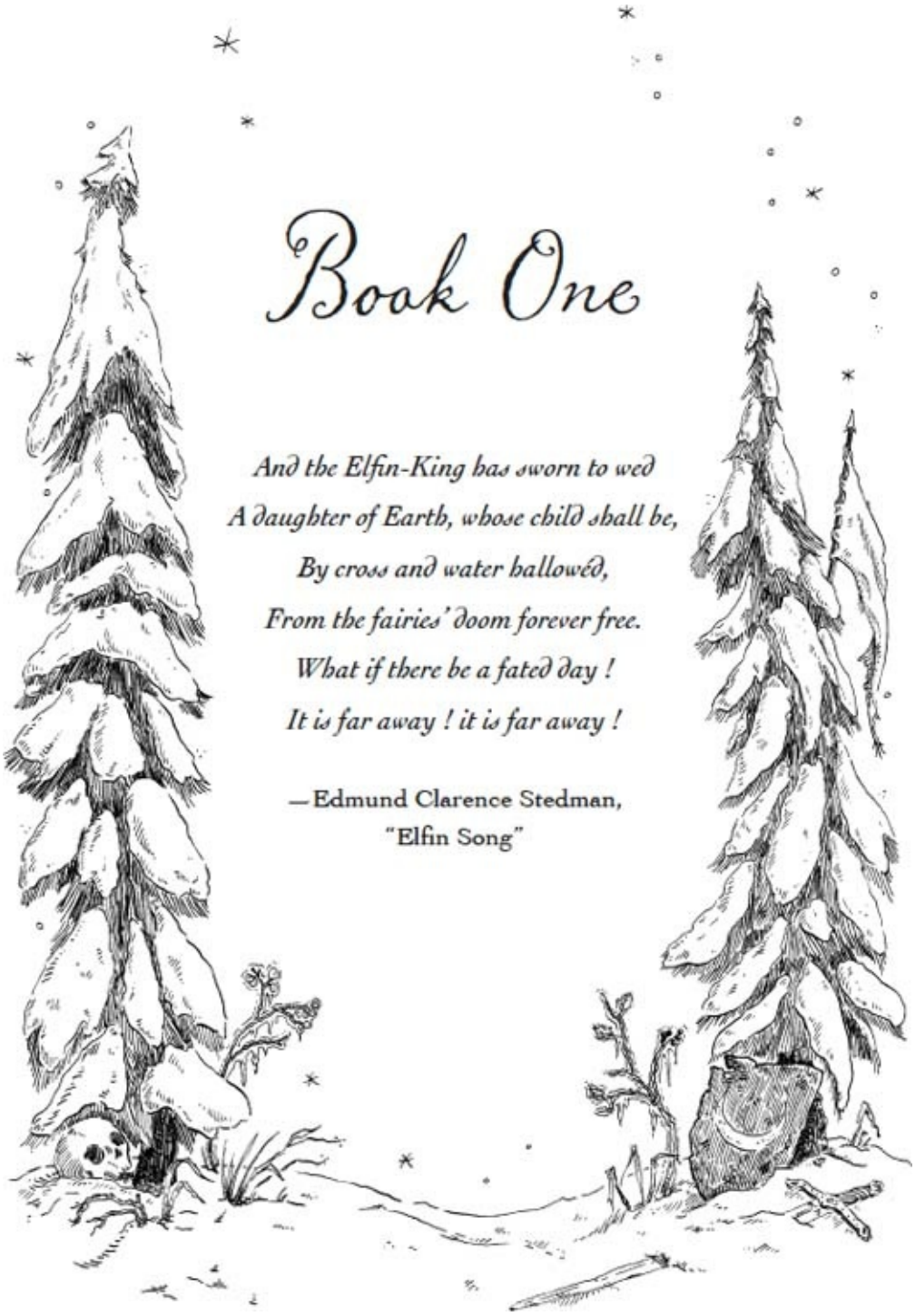
The Cruel Prince

The Wicked King

The Queen of Nothing

For Leigh Bardugo,
who never lets me get away with anything

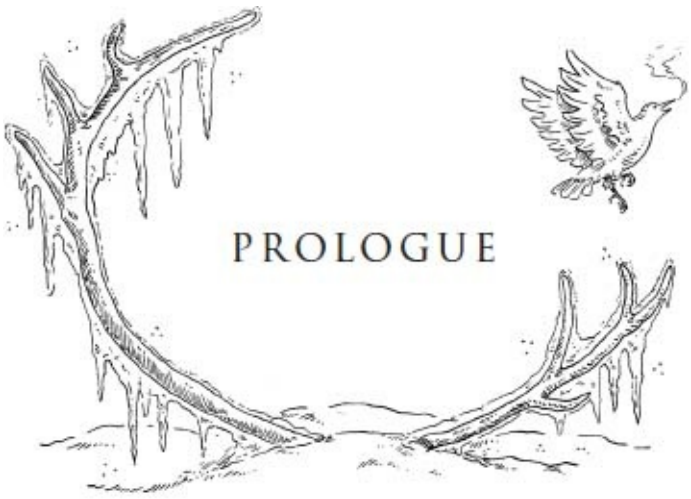
Map of the Shifting Isles of
ELFHAME
Crooked Forest
Locke's Estate
INSMOOR
Palace of Elfhame
Tower of Forgetting
INSEAR
INSWEAL
INSMIRE
Milkwood
Lake of Masks
Madocs Stronghold
Hollow Hall



Book One

And the Elfin-King has sworn to wed
A daughter of Earth, whose child shall be,
By cross and water hallowéd,
From the fairies' doom forever free.
What if there be a fated day!
It is far away! it is far away!

—Edmund Clarence Stedman,
"Elfin Song"



PROLOGUE

The Royal Astrologer, Baphen, squinted at the star chart and tried not to flinch when it seemed sure the youngest prince of Elfhame was about to be dropped on his royal head.

A week after Prince Cardan's birth and he was finally being presented to the High King. The previous five heirs had been seen immediately, still squalling in ruddy newness, but Lady Asha had barred the High King from visiting before she felt herself suitably restored from childbed.

The baby was thin and wizened, silent, staring at Eldred with black eyes. He lashed his little whiplike tail with such force that his swaddle threatened to come apart. Lady Asha seemed unsure how to cradle him. Indeed, she held him as though she hoped someone might take the burden from her very soon.

"Tell us of his future," the High King prompted. Only a few Folk were gathered to witness the presentation of the new prince—the mortal Val Moren, who was both Court Poet and Seneschal, and two members of the Living Council: Randalin, the Minister of Keys, and Baphen. In the empty hall, the High King's words echoed.

Baphen hesitated, but he could do nothing save answer. Eldred had been favored with five children before Prince Cardan, shocking fecundity among the Folk, with their thin blood and few births. The stars had spoken of each little prince's and princess's fated accomplishments in poetry and song, in politics, in

virtue, and even in vice. But this time what he'd seen in the stars had been entirely different. "Prince Cardan will be your last born child," the Royal Astrologer said. "He will be the destruction of the crown and the ruination of the throne."

Lady Asha sucked in a sharp breath. For the first time, she drew the child protectively closer. He squirmed in her arms. "I wonder who has influenced your interpretation of the signs. Perhaps Princess Elowyn had a hand in it. Or Prince Dain."

Maybe it would be better if she dropped him, Baphen thought unkindly.

High King Eldred ran a hand over his chin. "Can nothing be done to stop this?"

It was a mixed blessing to have the stars supply Baphen with so many riddles and so few answers. He often wished he saw things more clearly, but not this time. He bowed his head so he had an excuse not to meet the High King's gaze. "Only out of his spilled blood can a great ruler rise, but not before what I have told you comes to pass."

Eldred turned to Lady Asha and her child, the harbinger of ill luck. The baby was as silent as a stone, not crying or cooing, tail still lashing.

"Take the boy away," the High King said. "Rear him as you see fit."

Lady Asha did not flinch. "I will rear him as befits his station. He is a prince, after all, and your son."

There was a brittleness in her tone, and Baphen was uncomfortably reminded that some prophecies are fulfilled by the very actions meant to prevent them.

For a moment, everyone stood silent. Then Eldred nodded to Val Moren, who left the dais and returned holding a slim wooden box with a pattern of roots traced over the lid.

"A gift," said the High King, "in recognition of your contribution to the Greenbriar line."

Val Moren opened the box, revealing an exquisite necklace of heavy emeralds. Eldred lifted them and placed them over Lady Asha's head. He touched her cheek with the back of one hand.

"Your generosity is great, my lord," she said, somewhat mollified. The baby clutched a stone in his little fist, staring up at his father with fathomless eyes.

"Go now and rest," said Eldred, his voice softer. This time, she yielded.

Lady Asha departed with her head high, her grip on the child tighter. Baphen felt a shiver of some premonition that had nothing to do with stars.

High King Eldred did not visit Lady Asha again, nor did he call her to him. Perhaps he ought to have put his dissatisfaction aside and cultivated his son. But looking upon Prince Cardan was like looking into an uncertain future, and so he avoided it.

Lady Asha, as the mother of a prince, found herself much in demand with the Court, if not the High King. Given to whimsy and frivolity, she wished to return to the merry life of a courtier. She couldn't attend balls with an infant in tow, so she found a cat whose kittens were stillborn to act as his wet nurse.

That arrangement lasted until Prince Cardan was able to crawl. By then, the cat was heavy with a new litter and he'd begun to pull at her tail. She fled to the stables, abandoning him, too.

And so he grew up in the palace, cherished by no one and checked by no one. Who would dare stop a prince from stealing food from the grand tables and eating beneath them, devouring what he'd taken in savage bites? His sisters and brothers only laughed, playing with him as they would with a puppy.

He wore clothes only occasionally, donning garlands of flowers instead and throwing stones when the guard tried to come near him. None but his mother exerted any hold over him, and she seldom tried to curb his excesses. Just the opposite.

"You're a prince," she told him firmly when he would shy away from a conflict or fail to make a demand. "Everything is yours. You have only to take it." And sometimes: "I want that. Get it for me."

It is said that faerie children are not like mortal children. They need little in the way of love. They need not be tucked in at night, but may sleep just as happily in a cold corner of a ballroom, curled up in a tablecloth. They need not be fed; they are just as happy lapping up dew and skimming bread and cream from the kitchens. They need not be comforted, since they seldom weep.

But if faerie children need little love, faerie princes require some counsel.

Without it, when Cardan's elder brother suggested shooting a walnut off the head of a mortal, Cardan had not the wisdom to demur. His habits were impulsive; his manner, imperious.

"Keen marksmanship so impresses our father," Prince Dain said with a small, teasing smile. "But perhaps it is too difficult. Better not to make the attempt than to fail."

For Cardan, who could not attract his father's good notice and desperately wanted it, the prospect was tempting. He didn't ask himself who the mortal was or how he had come to be at the Court. Cardan certainly never suspected that the

man was beloved of Val Moren and that the seneschal would go mad with grief if the man died.

Leaving Dain free to assume a more prominent position at the High King's right hand.

"Too difficult? Better not to make the attempt? Those are the words of a coward," Cardan said, full of childish bravado. In truth, his brother intimidated him, but that only made him more scornful.

Prince Dain smiled. "Let us exchange arrows at least. Then if you miss, you can say that it was *my* arrow that went awry."

Prince Cardan ought to have been suspicious of this kindness, but he'd had little enough of the real thing to tell true from false.

Instead, he notched Dain's arrow and pulled back the bowstring, aiming for the walnut. A sinking feeling came over him. He might not shoot true. He might hurt the man. But on the heels of that, angry glee sparked at the idea of doing something so horrifying that his father could no longer ignore him. If he could not get the High King's attention for something good, then perhaps he could get it for something really, really bad.

Cardan's hand wobbled.

The mortal's liquid eyes watched him in frozen fear. Enchanted, of course. No one would stand like that willingly. That was what decided him.

Cardan forced a laugh as he relaxed the bowstring, letting the arrow fall out of the notch. "I simply will not shoot under these conditions," he said, feeling ridiculous at having backed down. "The wind is coming from the north and mussing my hair. It's getting all in my eyes."

But Prince Dain raised his bow and loosed the arrow Cardan had exchanged with him. It struck the mortal through the throat. He dropped with almost no sound, eyes still open, now staring at nothing.

It happened so fast that Cardan didn't cry out, didn't react. He just stared at his brother, slow, terrible understanding crashing over him.

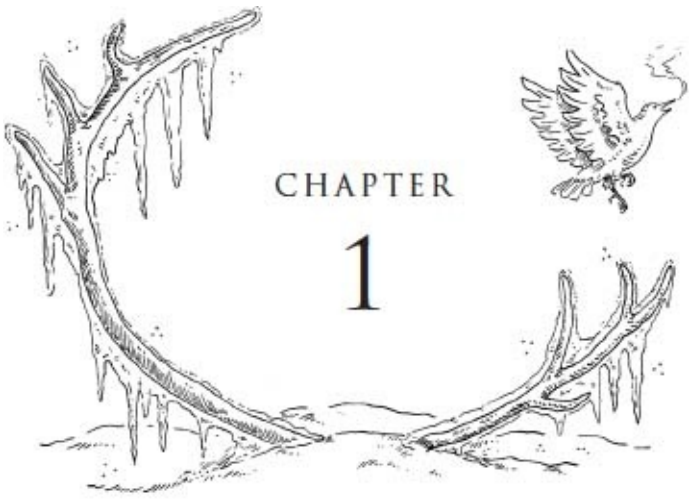
"Ah," said Prince Dain with a satisfied smile. "A shame. It seems *your* arrow went awry. Perhaps you can complain to our father about that hair in your eyes."

After, though he protested, no one would hear Prince Cardan's side. Dain saw to that. He told the story of the youngest prince's recklessness, his arrogance, his arrow. The High King would not even allow Cardan an audience.

Despite Val Moren's pleas for execution, Cardan was punished for the mortal's death in the way that princes are punished. The High King had Lady Asha locked away in the Tower of Forgetting in Cardan's stead—something

Eldred was relieved to have a reason to do, since he found her both tiresome and troublesome. Care of Prince Cardan was given over to Balekin, the eldest of the siblings, the cruelest, and the only one willing to take him.

And so was Prince Cardan's reputation made. He had little to do but further it.



CHAPTER 1

I, Jude Duarte, High Queen of Elfhame in exile, spend most mornings dozing in front of daytime television, watching cooking competitions and cartoons and reruns of a show where people have to complete a gauntlet by stabbing boxes and bottles and cutting through a whole fish. In the afternoons, if he lets me, I train my brother, Oak. Nights, I run errands for the local faeries.

I keep my head down, as I probably should have done in the first place. And if I curse Cardan, then I have to curse myself, too, for being the fool who walked right into the trap he set for me.

As a child, I imagined returning to the mortal world. Taryn and Vivi and I would rehash what it was like there, recalling the scents of fresh-cut grass and gasoline, reminiscing over playing tag through neighborhood backyards and bobbing in the bleachy chlorine of summer pools. I dreamed of iced tea, reconstituted from powder, and orange juice Popsicles. I longed for mundane things: the smell of hot asphalt, the swag of wires between streetlights, the jingles of commercials.

Now, stuck in the mortal world for good, I miss Faerieland with a raw intensity. It's magic I long for, magic I miss. Maybe I even miss being afraid. I feel as though I am dreaming away my days, restless, never fully awake.

I drum my fingers on the painted wood of a picnic table. It's early autumn, already cool in Maine. Late-afternoon sun dapples the grass outside the

apartment complex as I watch Oak play with other children in the strip of woods between here and the highway. They are kids from the building, some younger and some older than his eight years, all dropped off by the same yellow school bus. They play a totally disorganized game of war, chasing one another with sticks. They hit as children do, aiming for the weapon instead of the opponent, screaming with laughter when a stick breaks. I can't help noticing they are learning all the wrong lessons about swordsmanship.

Still, I watch. And so I notice when Oak uses glamour.

He does it unconsciously, I think. He's sneaking toward the other kids, but then there's a stretch with no easy cover. He keeps on toward them, and even though he's in plain sight, they don't seem to notice.

Closer and closer, with the kids still not looking his way. And when he jumps at them, stick swinging, they shriek with wholly authentic surprise.

He was invisible. He was using glamour. And I, geased against being deceived by it, didn't notice until it was done. The other children just think he was clever or lucky. Only I know how careless it was.

I wait until the children head to their apartments. They peel off, one by one, until only my brother remains. I don't need magic, even with leaves underfoot, to steal up on him. With a swift motion, I wrap my arm around Oak's neck, pressing it against his throat hard enough to give him a good scare. He bucks back, nearly hitting me in the chin with his horns. Not bad. He attempts to break my hold, but it's half-hearted. He can tell it's me, and I don't frighten him.

I tighten my hold. If I press my arm against his throat long enough, he'll black out.

He tries to speak, and then he must start to feel the effects of not getting enough air. He forgets all his training and goes wild, lashing out, scratching my arms and kicking against my legs. Making me feel awful. I wanted him to be a little afraid, scared enough to fight back, not *terrified*.

I let go, and he stumbles away, panting, eyes wet with tears. "What was that for?" he wants to know. He's glaring at me accusingly.

"To remind you that fighting isn't a game," I say, feeling as though I am speaking with Madoc's voice instead of my own. I don't want Oak to grow up as I did, angry and afraid. But I want him to *survive*, and Madoc did teach me how to do that.

How am I supposed to figure out how to give him the right stuff when all I know is my own messed-up childhood? Maybe the parts of it I value are the

wrong parts. “What are you going to do against an opponent who wants to actually hurt you?”

“I don’t care,” Oak says. “I don’t care about that stuff. I don’t want to be king. I *never* want to be king.”

For a moment, I just stare at him. I want to believe he’s lying, but, of course, he can’t lie.

“We don’t always have a choice in our fate,” I say.

“*You* rule if you care so much!” he says. “I won’t do it. Never.”

I have to grind my teeth together to keep from screaming. “I can’t, as you know, because I’m in exile,” I remind him.

He stamps a hoofed foot. “So am I! And the only reason I’m in the human world is because Dad wants the stupid crown and you want it and everyone wants it. Well, I don’t. It’s cursed.”

“All power is cursed,” I say. “The most terrible among us will do anything to get it, and those who’d wield power best don’t want it thrust upon them. But that doesn’t mean they can avoid their responsibilities forever.”

“You can’t make me be High King,” he says, and wheeling away from me, breaks into a run in the direction of the apartment building.

I sit down on the cold ground, knowing that I screwed up the conversation completely. Knowing that Madoc trained Taryn and me better than I am training Oak. Knowing that I was arrogant and foolish to think I could control Cardan.

Knowing that in the great game of princes and queens, I have been swept off the board.

Inside the apartment, Oak’s door is shut firmly against me. Vivienne, my faerie sister, stands at the kitchen counter, grinning into her phone.

When she notices me, she grabs my hands and spins me around and around until I’m dizzy.

“Heather loves me again,” she says, wild laughter in her voice.

Heather was Vivi’s human girlfriend. She’d put up with Vivi’s evasions about her past. She even put up with Oak’s coming to live with them in this apartment. But when she found out that Vivi wasn’t human *and* that Vivi had used magic on her, she dumped her and moved out. I hate to say this, because I want my sister to be happy—and Heather did make her happy—but it was a richly deserved dumping.

I pull away to blink at her in confusion. “What?”

Vivi waves her phone at me. “She texted me. She wants to come back. Everything is going to be like it was before.”

Leaves don’t grow back onto a vine, cracked walnuts don’t fit back into their shells, and girlfriends who’ve been enchanted don’t just wake up and decide to let things slide with their terrifying exes.

“Let me see that,” I say, reaching for Vivi’s phone. She allows me to take it.

I scroll back through the texts, most of them coming from Vivi and full of apologies, ill-considered promises, and increasingly desperate pleas. On Heather’s end, there was a lot of silence and a few messages that read “I need more time to think.”

Then this:

> I want to forget Faerie. I want to forget that you and Oak aren’t human. I don’t want to feel like this anymore. If I asked you to make me forget, would you?

I stare at the words for a long moment, drawing in a breath.

I can see why Vivi has read the message the way she has, but I think she’s read it wrong. If I’d written that, the last thing I would want was for Vivi to agree. I’d want her to help me see that even if Vivi and Oak weren’t human, they still loved me. I would want Vivi to insist that pretending away Faerie wouldn’t help. I would want Vivi to tell me that she’d made a mistake and that she’d never ever make that mistake again, no matter what.

If I’d sent that text, it would be a test.

I hand the phone back to Vivi. “What are you going to tell her?”

“That I’ll do whatever she wants,” my sister says, an extravagant vow for a mortal and a downright terrifying vow from someone who would be bound to that promise.

“Maybe she doesn’t know what she wants,” I say. I am disloyal no matter what I do. Vivi is my sister, but Heather is human. I owe them both something.

And right now, Vivi isn’t interested in supposing anything but that all will be well. She gives me a big, relaxed smile and picks up an apple from the fruit bowl, tossing it in the air. “What’s wrong with Oak? He stomped in here and slammed his door. Is he going to be this dramatic when he’s a teenager?”

“He doesn’t want to be High King,” I tell her.

“Oh. That.” Vivi glances toward his bedroom. “I thought it was something important.”

CHAPTER 2

Tonight, it’s a relief to head to work.

Faeries in the mortal world have a different set of needs than those in Elfhame. The solitary fey, surviving at the edges of Faerie, do not concern themselves with revels and courtly machinations.

And it turns out they have plenty of odd jobs for someone like me, a mortal who knows their ways and isn’t worried about getting into the occasional fight. I met Bryern a week after I left Elfhame. He turned up outside the apartment complex, a black-furred, goat-headed, and goat-hooved faerie with bowler hat in hand, saying he was an old friend of the Roach.

“I understand you’re in a unique position,” he said, looking at me with those strange golden goat eyes, their black pupils a horizontal rectangle. “Presumed dead, is that correct? No Social Security number. No mortal schooling.”

“And looking for work,” I told him, figuring out where this was going. “Off the books.”

“You cannot get any further off the books than with me,” he assured me, placing one clawed hand over his heart. “Allow me to introduce myself. Bryern. A phooka, if you hadn’t already guessed.”

He didn’t ask for oaths of loyalty or any promises whatsoever. I could work as much as I wanted, and the pay was commensurate with my daring.

Tonight, I meet him by the water. I glide up on the secondhand bike I acquired. The back tire deflates quickly, but I got it cheap. It works pretty well to get me around. Bryern is dressed with typical fussiness: His hat has a band decorated with a few brightly colored duck feathers, and he's paired that with a tweed jacket. As I come closer, he withdraws a watch from one pocket and peers at it with an exaggerated frown.

"Oh, am I late?" I ask. "Sorry. I'm used to telling time by the slant of moonlight."

He gives me an annoyed look. "Just because you've lived in the High Court, you need not put on airs. You're no one special now."

I am the High Queen of Elfhame. The thought comes to me unbidden, and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from saying those ridiculous words. He's right: I am no one special now.

"What's the job?" I ask instead, as blandly as I can.

"One of the Folk in Old Port has been eating locals. I have a contract for someone willing to extract a promise from her to cease."

I find it hard to believe that he cares what happens to humans—or cares enough to pay for me to do something about it. "Local *mortals*?"

He shakes his head. "No. No. Us Folk." Then he seems to remember to whom he's speaking and looks a little flustered. I try not to take his slip as a compliment.

Killing and *eating* the Folk? Nothing about that signals an easy job. "Who's hiring?"

He gives a nervous laugh. "No one who wants their name associated with the deed. But they're willing to remunerate you for making it happen."

One of the reasons Bryern likes hiring me is that I can get close to the Folk. They don't expect a mortal to be the one to pickpocket them or to stick a knife in their side. They don't expect a mortal to be unaffected by glamour or to know their customs or to see through their terrible bargains.

Another reason is, I need the money enough that I'm willing to take jobs like this—ones that I know right from the start are going to suck.

"Address?" I ask, and he slips me a folded paper.

I open it and glance down. "This better pay well."

"Five hundred American dollars," he says, as though this is an extravagant sum.

Our rent is twelve hundred a month, not to mention groceries and utilities. With Heather gone, my half is about eight hundred. And I'd like to get a new tire

for my bike. Five hundred isn't nearly enough, not for something like this.

"Fifteen hundred," I counter, raising my eyebrows. "In cash, verifiable by iron. Half up front, and if I don't come back, you pay Vivienne the other half as a gift to my bereaved family."

Bryern presses his lips together, but I know he's got the money. He just doesn't want to pay me enough that I can get choosy about jobs.

"A thousand," he compromises, reaching into a pocket inside his tweed jacket and withdrawing a stack of bills banded by a silver clip. "And look, I have half on me right now. You can take it."

"Fine," I agree. It's a decent paycheck for what could be a single night's work if I'm lucky.

He hands over the cash with a sniff. "Let me know when you've completed the task."

There's an iron fob on my key chain. I run it ostentatiously over the edges of the money to make sure it's real. It never hurts to remind Bryern that I'm careful.

"Plus fifty bucks for expenses," I say on impulse.

He frowns. After a moment, he reaches into a different part of his jacket and hands over the extra cash. "Just take care of this," he says. The lack of quibbling is a bad sign. Maybe I should have asked more questions before I agreed to this job. I definitely should have negotiated harder.

Too late now.

I get back on my bike and, with a farewell wave to Bryern, kick off toward downtown. Once upon a time, I imagined myself as a knight astride a steed, glorying in contests of skill and honor. Too bad my talents turned out to lie in another direction entirely.

I suppose I am a skilled enough murderer of Folk, but what I really excel at is getting under their skin. Hopefully that will serve me well in persuading a cannibal faerie to do what I want.

Before I go to confront her, I decide to ask around.

First, I see a hob named Magpie, who lives in a tree in Deering Oaks Park. He says he's heard she's a redcap, which isn't great news, but at least since I grew up with one, I am well informed about their nature. Redcaps crave violence and blood and murder—in fact, they get a little twitchy when there's none to be had for stretches of time. And if they're traditionalists, they have a cap they dip in the blood of their vanquished enemies, supposedly to grant them some stolen vitality of the slain.

I ask for a name, but Magpie doesn't know. He sends me to Ladhar, a clurichaun who slinks around the back of bars, sucking froth from the tops of beers when no one is looking and swindling mortals in games of chance.

"You didn't know?" Ladhar says, lowering his voice. "*Grima Mog.*"

I almost accuse him of lying, despite knowing better. Then I have a brief, intense fantasy of tracking down Bryern and making him choke on every dollar he gave me. "What the hell is *she* doing *here*?"

Grima Mog is the fearsome general of the Court of Teeth in the North. The same Court that the Roach and the Bomb escaped from. When I was little, Madoc read to me at bedtime from the memoirs of her battle strategies. Just thinking about facing her, I break out in a cold sweat.

I can't fight her. And I don't think I have a good chance of tricking her, either.

"Given the boot, I hear," Ladhar says. "Maybe she ate someone Lady Nore liked."

I don't have to do this job, I remind myself. I am no longer part of Dain's Court of Shadows. I am no longer trying to rule from behind High King Cardan's throne. I don't need to take big risks.

But I am curious.

Combine that with an abundance of wounded pride and you find yourself on the front steps of Grima Mog's warehouse around dawn. I know better than to go empty-handed. I've got raw meat from a butcher shop chilling in a Styrofoam cooler, a few sloppily made honey sandwiches wrapped in foil, and a bottle of decent sour beer.

Inside, I wander down a hall until I come to the door to what appears to be an apartment. I knock three times and hope that if nothing else, maybe the smell of the food will cover up the smell of my fear.

The door opens, and a woman in a housecoat peers out. She's bent over, leaning on a polished cane of black wood. "What do you want, deary?"

Seeing through her glamour as I do, I note the green tint to her skin and her overlarge teeth. Like my foster father: Madoc. The guy who killed my parents. The guy who read me her battle strategies. Madoc, once the Grand General of the High Court. Now enemy of the throne and not real happy with me, either.

Hopefully he and High King Cardan will ruin each other's lives.

"I brought you some gifts," I say, holding up the cooler. "Can I come in? I want to make a bargain."

She frowns a little.

“You can’t keep eating random Folk without someone being sent to try to persuade you to stop,” I say.

“Perhaps I will eat *you*, pretty child,” she counters, brightening. But she steps back to allow me into her lair. I guess she can’t make a meal of me in the hall.

The apartment is loft-style, with high ceilings and brick walls. Nice. Floors polished and glossed up. Big windows letting in light and a decent view of the town. It’s furnished with old things. The tufting on a few of the pieces is torn, and there are marks that could have come from a stray cut of a knife.

The whole place smells like blood. A coppery, metal smell, overlaid with a slightly cloying sweetness. I put my gifts on a heavy wooden table.

“For you,” I say. “In the hopes you’ll overlook my rudeness in calling on you uninvited.”

She sniffs at the meat, turns a honey sandwich over in her hand, and pops off the cap on the beer with her fist. Taking a long draught, she looks me over.

“Someone instructed you in the niceties. I wonder why they bothered, little goat. You’re obviously the sacrifice sent in the hopes my appetite can be sated with mortal flesh.” She smiles, showing her teeth. It’s possible she dropped her glamour in that moment, although, since I saw through it already, I can’t tell.

I blink at her. She blinks back, clearly waiting for a reaction.

By not screaming and running for the door, I have annoyed her. I can tell. I think she was looking forward to chasing me when I ran.

“You’re Grima Mog,” I say. “Leader of armies. Destroyer of your enemies. Is this really how you want to spend your retirement?”

“Retirement?” She echoes the word as though I have dealt her the deadliest insult. “Though I have been cast down, I will find another army to lead. An army bigger than the first.”

Sometimes I tell myself something a lot like that. Hearing it aloud, from someone else’s mouth, is jarring. But it gives me an idea. “Well, the local Folk would prefer not to get eaten while you’re planning your next move. Obviously, being human, I’d rather you didn’t eat mortals—I doubt they’d give you what you’re looking for anyway.”

She waits for me to go on.

“A challenge,” I say, thinking of everything I know about redcaps. “That’s what you crave, right? A good fight. I bet the Folk you killed weren’t all that special. A waste of your talents.”

“Who sent you?” she asks finally. Reevaluating. Trying to figure out my angle.

“What did you do to piss her off?” I ask. “Your queen? It must have been something big to get kicked out of the Court of Teeth.”

“*Who sent you?*” she roars. I guess I hit a nerve. My best skill.

I try not to smile, but I’ve missed the rush of power that comes with playing a game like this, of strategy and cunning. I hate to admit it, but I’ve missed risking my neck. There’s no room for regrets when you’re busy trying to win. Or at least not to die. “I told you. The local Folk who don’t want to get eaten.”

“Why *you*?” she asks. “Why would they send a slip of a girl to try to convince me of anything?”

Scanning the room, I take note of a round box on top of the refrigerator. An old-fashioned hatbox. My gaze snags on it. “Probably because it would be no loss to them if I failed.”

At that, Grima Mog laughs, taking another sip of the sour beer. “A fatalist. So how will you persuade me?”

I walk to the table and pick up the food, looking for an excuse to get close to that hatbox. “First, by putting away your groceries.”

Grima Mog looks amused. “I suppose an old lady like myself could use a young thing doing a few errands around the house. But be careful. You might find more than you bargained for in my larder, little goat.”

I open the door of the fridge. The remains of the Folk she’s killed greet me. She’s collected arms and heads, preserved somehow, baked and broiled and put away just like leftovers after a big holiday dinner. My stomach turns.

A wicked smile crawls across her face. “I assume you hoped to challenge me to a duel? Intended to brag about how you’d put up a good fight? Now you see what it means to lose to Grima Mog.”

I take a deep breath. Then with a hop, I knock the hatbox off the top of the fridge and into my arms.

“Don’t touch that!” she shouts, pushing to her feet as I rip off the lid.

And there it is: the cap. Lacquered with blood, layers and layers of it.

She’s halfway across the floor to me, teeth bared. I pull out a lighter from my pocket and flick the flame to life with my thumb. She halts abruptly at the sight of the fire.

“I know you’ve spent long, long years building the patina of this cap,” I say, willing my hand not to shake, willing the flame not to go out. “Probably there’s blood on here from your first kill, and your last. Without it, there will be no reminder of your past conquests, no trophies, nothing. Now I need you to make a

deal with me. Vow that there will be no more murders. Not the Folk, not humans, for so long as you reside in the mortal world."

"And if I don't, you'll burn my treasure?" Grima Mog finishes for me. "There's no honor in that."

"I guess I *could* offer to fight you," I say. "But I'd probably lose. This way, I win."

Grima Mog points the tip of her black cane toward me. "You're Madoc's human child, aren't you? And our new High King's seneschal in exile. Tossed out like me."

I nod, discomfited at being recognized.

"What did *you* do?" she asks, a satisfied little smile on her face. "It must have been something big."

"I was a fool," I say, because I might as well admit it. "I gave up the bird in my hand for two in the bush."

She gives a big, booming laugh. "Well, aren't we a pair, redcap's daughter? But murder is in my bones and blood. I don't plan on giving up killing. If I am to be stuck in the mortal world, then I intend to have some fun."

I bring the flame closer to the hat. The bottom of it begins to blacken, and a terrible stench fills the air.

"Stop!" she shouts, giving me a look of raw hatred. "Enough. Let me make *you* an offer, little goat. We spar. If you lose, my cap is returned to me, unburnt. I continue to hunt as I have. And you give me your littlest finger."

"To eat?" I ask, taking the flame away from the hat.

"If I like," she returns. "Or to wear like a brooch. What do you care what I do with it? The point is that it will be mine."

"And why would I agree to that?"

"Because if you win, you will have your promise from me. And I will tell you something of significance regarding your High King."

"I don't want to know anything about him," I snap, too fast and too angrily. I hadn't been expecting her to invoke Cardan.

Her laugh this time is low and rumbling. "Little liar."

We stare at each other for a long moment. Grima Mog's gaze is amiable enough. She knows she has me. I am going to agree to her terms. I know it, too, although it's ridiculous. She's a legend. I don't see how I can win.

But Cardan's name pounds in my ears.

Does he have a new seneschal? Does he have a new lover? Is he going to Council meetings himself? Does he talk about me? Do he and Locke mock me

together? Does Taryn laugh?

"We spar until first blood," I say, shoving everything else out of my head. It's a pleasure to have someone to focus my anger on. "I'm not giving you my finger," I say. "You win, you get your cap. Period. And I walk out of here. The concession I am making is fighting you at all."

"First blood is dull." Grima Mog leans forward, her body alert. "Let's agree to fight until one of us cries off. Let it end somewhere between bloodshed and crawling away to die on the way home." She sighs, as if thinking a happy thought. "Give me a chance to break every bone in your scrawny body."

"You're betting on my pride." I tuck her cap into one pocket and the lighter into the other.

She doesn't deny it. "Did I bet right?"

First blood *is* dull. It's all dancing around each other, looking for an opening. It's not real fighting. When I answer her, the word rushes out of me. "Yes."

"Good." She lifts the tip of the cane toward the ceiling. "Let's go to the roof."

"Well, this is very civilized," I say.

"You better have brought a weapon, because I'll loan you nothing." She heads toward the door with a heavy sigh, as though she really is the old woman she's glamoured to be.

I follow her out of her apartment, down the dimly lit hall, and into the even darker stairway, my nerves firing. I hope I know what I'm doing. She goes up the steps two at a time, eager now, slamming open a metal door at the top. I hear the clatter of steel as she draws a thin sword out of her cane. A greedy smile pulls her lips too wide, showing off her sharp teeth.

I draw the long knife I have hidden in my boot. It doesn't have the best reach, but I don't have the ability to glamour things; I can't very well ride my bike around with Nightfell on my back.

Still, right now, I really wish I'd figured out a way to do just that.

I step onto the asphalt roof of the building. The sun is starting to rise, tinting the sky pink and gold. A chill breeze blows through the air, bringing with it the scents of concrete and garbage, along with goldenrod from the nearby park.

My heart speeds with some combination of terror and eagerness. When Grima Mog comes at me, I am ready. I parry and move out of the way. I do it again and again, which annoys her.

"You promised me a threat," she growls, but at least I have a sense of how she moves. I know she's hungry for blood, hungry for violence. I know she's used to

hunting prey. I just hope she's overconfident. It's possible she will make mistakes facing someone who can fight back.

Unlikely, but possible.

When she comes at me again, I spin and kick the back of her knee hard enough to send her crashing to the ground. She roars, scrambling up and coming at me full speed. For a moment, the fury in her face and those fearsome teeth send a horrible, paralyzing jolt through me.

Monster! my mind screams.

I clench my jaw against the urge to keep dodging. Our blades shine, fish-scale bright in the new light of the day. The metal slams together, ringing like a bell. We battle across the roof, my feet clever as we scuff back and forth. Sweat starts on my brow and under my arms. My breath comes hot, clouding in the chill air.

It feels good to be fighting someone other than myself.

Grima Mog's eyes narrow, watching me, looking for weaknesses. I am conscious of every correction Madoc ever gave me, every bad habit the Ghost tried to train out of me. She begins a series of brutal blows, trying to drive me to the edge of the building. I give ground, attempting to defend myself against the flurry, against the longer reach of her blade. She was holding back before, but she's not holding back now.

Again and again she pushes me toward a drop through the open air. I fight with grim determination. Perspiration slicks my skin, beads between my shoulder blades.

Then my foot smacks into a metal pipe sticking up through the asphalt. I stumble, and she strikes. It's all I can do to avoid getting speared, and it costs me my knife, which goes hurtling off the roof. I hear it hit the street below with a dull thud.

I should never have taken this assignment. I should never have agreed to this fight. I should never have taken up Cardan's offer of marriage and never been exiled to the mortal world.

Anger gives me a burst of energy, and I use it to get out of Grima Mog's way, letting the momentum of her strike carry her blade down past me. Then I elbow her hard in the arm and grab for the hilt of her sword.

It's not a very honorable move, but I haven't been honorable for a long time. Grima Mog is very strong, but she's also surprised. For a moment, she hesitates, but then she slams her forehead into mine. I go reeling, but I almost had her weapon.

I almost had it.

My head is pounding, and I feel a little dizzy.

“That’s cheating, girl,” she tells me. We’re both breathing hard. I feel like my lungs are made of lead.

“I’m no knight.” As though to emphasize the point, I pick up the only weapon I can see: a metal pole. It’s heavy and has no edge whatsoever, but it’s all there is. At least it’s longer than the knife.

She laughs. “You ought to concede, but I’m delighted you haven’t.”

“I’m an optimist,” I say. Now when she runs at me, she has all the speed, although I have more reach. We spin around each other, her striking and my parrying with something that swings like a baseball bat. I wish for a lot of things, but mostly to make it off this roof.

My energy is flagging. I am not used to the weight of the pipe, and it’s hard to maneuver.

Give up, my whirling brain supplies. *Cry off while you’re still standing. Give her the cap, forget the money, and go home. Vivi can magic leaves into extra cash. Just this time, it wouldn’t be so bad. You’re not fighting for a kingdom. That, you already lost.*

Grima Mog comes toward me as though she can scent my despair. She puts me through my paces, a few fast, aggressive strikes in the hopes of getting under my guard.

Sweat drips down my forehead, stinging my eyes.

Madoc described fighting as a lot of things, as a game of strategy played at speed, as a dance, but right now it feels like an argument. Like an argument where she’s keeping me too busy defending myself to score any points.

Despite the strain on my muscles, I switch to holding the pipe in one hand and pull her cap from my pocket with the other.

“What are you doing? You promised—” she begins.

I throw the cap at her face. She grabs for it, distracted. In that moment, I swing the pipe at her side with all the strength in my body.

I catch her in the shoulder, and she falls with a howl of pain. I hit her again, bringing the metal rod down in an arc onto her outstretched arm, sending her sword spinning across the roof.

I raise the pipe to swing again.

“Enough.” Grima Mog looks up at me from the asphalt, blood on her pointed teeth, astonishment in her face. “I yield.”

“You do?” The pipe sags in my hand.

“Yes, little cheat,” she grits out, pushing herself into a sitting position. “You bested me. Now help me up.”

I drop the pipe and walk closer, half-expecting her to pull out a knife and sink it into my side. But she only lifts a hand and allows me to haul her to her feet. She puts her cap on her head and cradles the arm I struck in the other.

“The Court of Teeth have thrown in their lot with the old Grand General—your father—and a whole host of other traitors. I have it on good authority that your High King is to be dethroned before the next full moon. How do you like those apples?”

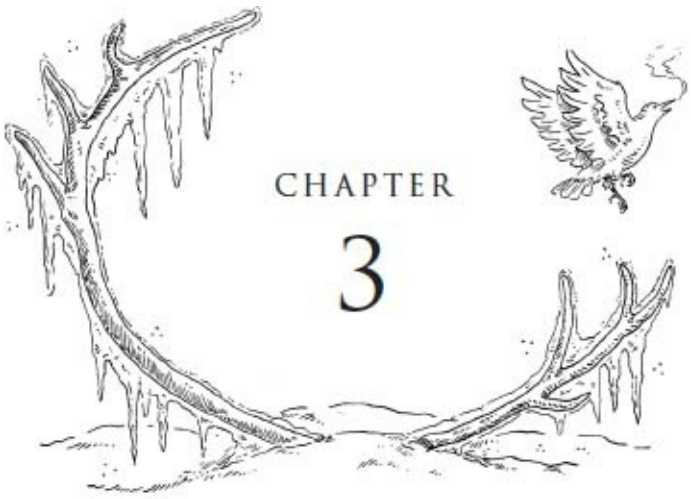
“Is that why you left?” I ask her. “Because you’re not a traitor?”

“I left because of another little goat. Now be off with you. This was more fun than I expected, but I think our game is at a close.”

Her words ring in my ears. *Your High King. Dethroned.* “You still owe me a promise,” I say, my voice coming out like a croak.

And to my surprise, Grima Mog gives me one. She vows to hunt no more in the mortal lands.

“Come fight me again,” she calls after me as I head for the stairs. “I have secrets aplenty. There are so many things you don’t know, daughter of Madoc. And I think you crave a little violence yourself.”



CHAPTER 3

My muscles stiffen up almost immediately, and the idea of pedaling home makes me feel so tired I'd rather just lie down on the sidewalk, so I take the bus. I get a lot of dirty looks from impatient commuters while strapping my bike to the rack on the front, but when people notice I'm bleeding, they decide in favor of ignoring me.

My sense of a day's shape sits oddly with the human world. In Faerie, staggering home at dawn is the equivalent of staggering home at midnight for mortals. But in the human world, the bright light of morning is supposed to banish shadows. It's a virtuous time, for early risers, not ne'er-do-wells. An elderly woman in a jaunty pink hat passes me a few tissues without comment, which I appreciate. I use them to clean myself up the best I can. For the rest of the ride, I look out the window at the blue sky, hurting and feeling sorry for myself. Raiding my pockets yields four aspirin. I take them in a single bitter mouthful.

Your High King is to be dethroned before the next full moon. How do you like those apples?

I try to tell myself that I don't care. That I should be glad if Elfhame winds up conquered. Cardan has plenty of other people to warn him of what's coming. There's the Court of Shadows and half of his military. The rulers of the low

Courts, all sworn to him. The whole Living Council. Even a new seneschal, should he bother to appoint one.

I don't want to think of someone else standing beside Cardan in my place, but my mind turns idly through all the worst choices anyway. He can't choose Nicasia, because she's already the Ambassador of the Undersea. He won't pick Locke, because he's already the Master of Revels and because he's insufferable. And not Lady Asha because … because she'd be *awful*. She'd find the job boring, and she'd trade his influence for whatever benefited her the most. Surely he knows better than to choose her. But maybe he doesn't. Cardan can be reckless. Maybe he and his wicked, heedless mother will make a mockery of the Greenbriar line and the Blood Crown. I hope they do. I hope everybody will be sorry, and him, most of all him.

And then Madoc will march in and take over.

I press my forehead against the cool glass and remind myself that it's no longer my problem. Instead of trying—and failing—not to think about Cardan, I try not to think at all.

I wake to someone shaking my shoulder. "Hey, kid," the bus driver says, worry etched in the lines of his face. "Kid?"

There was a time when my knife would have been in my hand and pressed to his throat before he finished speaking. I realize groggily that I don't even *have* my knife. I forgot to scout around the outside of Grima Mog's building and retrieve it.

"I'm up," I say unconvincingly, rubbing my face with one hand.

"For a minute there, I thought you'd kicked it." He frowns. "That's a lot of blood. You want me to call someone?"

"I'm fine," I say. I realize the bus is mostly empty. "Did I miss my stop?"

"We're here." He looks as though he wants to insist on getting me help. Then he shakes his head with a sigh. "Don't forget that bike."

I was stiff before, but nothing like now. I creak down the aisle like a root woman pulling her limbs from the ground for the first time. My fingers fumble with the mechanics of getting my bike off the front, and I notice the rusty stain on my fingers. I wonder if I just wiped blood across my face in front of the bus driver and touched my cheek self-consciously. I can't tell.

But then my bike is down, and I am able to shuffle across the grass toward the apartment building. I am going to drop the bike in the bushes and take my chances with its getting stolen. That promise to myself gets me most of the way

home when I spot someone sitting on the stoop. Pink hair glowing in the sunlight. She lifts a paper coffee cup in salute.

"Heather?" I say, keeping my distance. Considering how the bus driver looked at me, showing off my fresh cuts and bruises seems like a bad idea.

"I'm trying to get up the bravery to knock."

"Ah," I say, leaning my bike down on the grass. The bushes are too far off. "Well, you can just come in with me and—"

"No!" she says, and then realizing how loud that came out, lowers her voice. "I don't know if I'm going in today."

I look at her again, realizing how tired she seems, how faded the pink in her hair is, as though she hasn't bothered to re-dye it. "How long have you been out here?"

"Not long." She glances away from me and shrugs. "I come here sometimes. To check how I feel."

With a sigh, I give up on the idea that I am going to hide that I got hurt. I walk to the stairs, then slump down on a step, too tired to keep standing.

Heather stands. "Jude? Oh no, oh holy—what the—*what happened to you*?" she demands. I wince. Her voice is much too loud.

"Shhhh! I thought you didn't want Vivi to know you're here," I remind her. "Anyway, it looks worse than it is. I just need a shower and some bandages. And a good day's sleep."

"Okay," she says in a way that makes me think she doesn't believe me. "Let me help you go in. Please don't worry about me tripping over seeing your sister or whatever. You're actually hurt. You shouldn't have stood there talking to me!"

I shake my head, holding up a hand to ward off her offer. "I'll be fine. Just let me sit for a minute."

She gazes at me, worry warring with her desire to put off the inevitable confrontation with Vivi a little longer. "I thought you were still in that place? Did you get hurt there?"

"Faerieland?" I like Heather, but I am not going to pretend away the world I grew up in because she hates the idea of it. "No. This happened here. I've been staying with Vivi. Trying to figure things out. But if you move back in, I can make myself scarce."

She looks down at her knees. Bites a corner of a fingernail. Shakes her head. "Love is stupid. All we do is break one another's hearts."

“Yeah,” I say, thinking again of Cardan and how I walked right into the trap he set for me, as though I were some fool who’d never heard a ballad in her life. No matter how much happiness I wish for Vivi, I don’t want Heather to be the same kind of fool. “Yeah, *no*. Love might be stupid, but you’re not. I know about the message you sent Vivi. You can’t go through with it.”

Heather takes a long sip from her cup. “I have nightmares. About that place. Faerie. I can’t sleep. I look at people on the street, and I wonder if they’re glamoured. This world already has enough monsters, enough people who want to take advantage of me or hurt me or take away my rights. I don’t need to know there’s a whole *other* world full of monsters.”

“So not knowing is better?” I ask.

She scowls and is silent. Then, when she speaks again, she looks out past me, as though she’s looking at the parking lot. “I can’t even explain to my parents what Vee and I are fighting about. They keep asking me if she was kicking it with someone else or if having Oak around was just too much, like I can’t handle him being a *kid*, instead of whatever he is.”

“He’s still a kid,” I say.

“I *hate* being afraid of Oak,” she says. “I know it hurts his feelings. But I also hate that he and Vee have magic, magic that she could use to win every argument that we could ever have. Magic to make me obsessed with her. Or turn me into a duck. And that’s not even considering why I’m attracted to her in the first place.”

I frown. “Wait, what?”

Heather turns toward me. “Do you know what makes people love one another? Well, no one else does, either. But scientists study it, and there’s all this bizarre stuff about pheromones and facial symmetry and the circumstances under which you first met. People are weird. Our bodies are weird. Maybe I can’t help being attracted to her the same way flies can’t help being attracted to carnivorous plants.”

I make an incredulous sound, but Balekin’s words echo in my ears. *I have heard that for mortals, the feeling of falling in love is very like the feeling of fear.* Maybe he was more right than I wanted to believe.

Especially when I consider my feelings for Cardan, since there was no good reason I should have had any feelings for him at all.

“Okay,” Heather says, “I know I sound ridiculous. I feel ridiculous. But I also feel afraid. And I still think we should go inside and bandage you up.”

“Make Vivi promise not to use magic on you,” I say. “I can help you say the exact right words to bind her and then—” I stop speaking when I see that Heather is looking at me sadly, maybe because believing in promises sounds childish. Or maybe the idea of binding Vivi with a promise sounds magical enough to freak her out more.

Heather takes a deep breath. “Vee told me that she grew up here, before your parents were murdered. I’m sorry to even mention it, but I know she’s messed up about it. I mean, of course she is. Anyone would be.” She takes a breath. She’s waiting to see how I react.

I think about her words as I sit on the stairs, bruises coming up beside sluggishly bleeding slashes. *Anyone would be.* Nope, not me, not messed up at all.

I remember a much younger Vivi, who was furious all the time, who screamed and broke whatever she touched. Who slapped me every time I let Madoc hold me in the crook of his arm. Who seemed as though she would bring down his entire hall with her rage. But that was so long ago. We all gave in to our new life; it was just a matter of when.

I don’t say any of that. Heather takes a shaky breath. “The thing is, I wonder if she’s, you know, playing house with me. Pretending her life went the way she wanted. Pretending she never found out who she was and where she was from.”

I reach out and take Heather’s hand. “Vivi stayed so long in Faerie for me and Taryn,” I say. “She didn’t want to be there. And the reason she finally left was because of you. Because she loved you. So yeah, Vivi took the easy way out in not explaining stuff. She should definitely have told you the truth about Faerie. And she should have never, ever used magic on you, even if it was out of panic. But now you know. And I guess you have to decide if you can forgive her.”

She starts to say something, then stops herself. “Would *you*?” she asks finally.

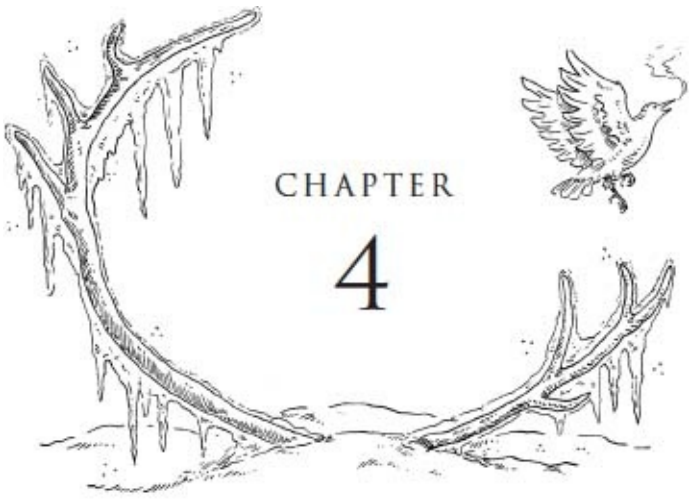
“I don’t know,” I say, looking at my knees. “I am not a very forgiving person these days.”

Heather stands. “Okay. You rested. Now get up. You need to go inside and take a bath in Neosporin. You probably should see a doctor, but I know what you’re going to say about that.”

“You’re right,” I say. “Right about everything. No doctor.” I roll onto my side to try to push myself to my feet, and when Heather comes over to help me, I let her. I even lean my weight on her as we limp together to the door. I have given up on being proud. As Bryern reminded me, I am no one special.

Heather and I go together through the kitchen, past the table with Oak's cereal bowl sitting on it, still half-full of pink milk. Two empty coffee mugs rest beside a box of Froot Loops. I note the number of mugs before my brain gives meaning to that detail. Just as Heather helps me into the living room, I realize we must have a guest.

Vivi is sitting on the couch. Her face lights up when she sees Heather. She looks at her like someone who just stole a giant's magnificent talking harp and knows consequences are on the horizon but can't bring herself to care. My gaze goes to the person beside her, sitting primly in a fanciful Elfhame court dress of gossamer and spun glass. My twin sister, Taryn.



CHAPTER 4

Adrenaline floods my body, despite my stiffness and soreness and bruises. I'd like to put my hands around Taryn's neck and squeeze until her head pops off.

Vivi stands, maybe because of my murderous look, but probably because Heather is right beside me.

"You," I say to my twin. "Get out."

"Wait," Taryn says, standing, too. "Please." Now we're all up, looking at one another across the small living room as though we're about to brawl.

"There's nothing I want to hear out of your lying mouth." I'm glad to have a target for all the feelings Grima Mog and Heather stirred up. A deserving target. "Get out, or I'll throw you out."

"This is Vivi's apartment," Taryn counters.

"This is *my* apartment," Heather reminds us. "And you're hurt, Jude."

"I don't care! And if you all want her here, then I can go!" With that, I turn and force myself to walk back to the door and down the stairs.

The screen door bangs. Then Taryn rushes in front of me, her gown blowing in the morning breeze. If I didn't know what a real princess of Faerie looked like, I might think she resembled one. For a moment, it seems impossible that we're related, no less identical.

"What happened to you?" she asks. "You look like you got into a fight."

I don’t speak. I just keep walking. I am not even sure where I am going, as slow and stiff and sore as I am. Maybe to Bryern. He’ll find me a place to crash, even if I won’t like the price later. Even bunking with Grima Mog would be better than this.

“I need your help,” Taryn says.

“No,” I say. “No. Absolutely not. Never. If that’s why you came here, now you’ve got your answer and you can leave.”

“Jude, just hear me out.” She walks in front of me, causing me to have to look at her. I glance up and then start to circle the billowing skirts of her dress.

“Also no,” I say. “No, I won’t help you. No, I won’t hear you explain why I should. It really is a magical word: *no*. You say whatever bullshit you want, and I just say no.”

“Locke is dead,” she blurts out.

I wheel around. Above us, the sky is bright and blue and clear. Birds call to one another from nearby trees. In the distance, there’s the sound of construction and road traffic. In this moment, the juxtaposition of standing in the mortal world and hearing about the demise of an immortal being—one that I knew, one that I kissed—is especially surreal.

“Dead?” It seems impossible, even after everything I’ve seen. “Are you sure?”

The night before his wedding, Locke and his friends tried to ride me down like a pack of dogs chasing a fox. I promised to pay him back for that. If he’s dead, I never will.

Nor will he ever plan another party for the purpose of humiliating Cardan. He won’t laugh with Nicasia nor play Taryn and me against each other again. Maybe I should be relieved, for all the trouble he caused. But I am surprised by feeling grief instead.

Taryn takes a breath, as if steeling herself. “He’s dead because I killed him.”

I shake my head, as though that’s going to help me understand what she’s saying. *“What?”*

She looks more embarrassed than anything else, as though she were confessing to some kind of dumb accident instead of to *murdering her husband*. I am uncomfortably reminded of Madoc, standing over three screaming children a moment after cutting down their parents, surprise on his face. As though he hadn’t quite meant for it to go so far. I wonder if that’s how Taryn feels.

I knew I’d grown up to be more like Madoc than I was comfortable with, but I never thought she and he were anything alike.

“And I need you to pretend to be me,” she finishes, with no apparent worry that suggesting the very trick that allowed Madoc to march off with half of Cardan’s army, the very trick that doomed me to agreeing to the plan that got me exiled, is in poor taste. “Just for a few hours.”

“Why?” I start, and then realize I am not being clear. “Not the pretending part. I mean, *why did you kill him?*”

She takes a breath, then looks back at the apartment. “Come inside, and I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you everything. Please, Jude.”

I look toward the apartment and reluctantly admit to myself I have nowhere else to go. I don’t want to go to Bryern. I want to go back inside and rest in my own bed. And despite being exhausted, I can’t deny that the prospect of sneaking into Elfhame as Taryn has an unsettling appeal. The very thought of being there, of seeing Cardan, speeds my heart.

At least no one is privy to my thoughts. Stupid as they are, they remain my own.

Inside, Heather and Vivi are standing in a corner of the kitchen near the coffeepot, having an intense conversation that I don’t want to disturb. At least they’re finally talking. That’s one good thing. I head into Oak’s room, where the few clothes I have are shoved in the bottom drawer of his dresser. Taryn follows, frowning.

“I’m going to take a shower,” I tell her. “And smear some ointment on myself. You’re going to make me some magical healing yarrow tea from the kitchen. Then I’ll be ready to hear your confession.”

“Let me help you out of that,” Taryn says with an exasperated shake of her head when I’m about to object. “You have no squire.”

“Nor any armor for her to polish,” I say, but I don’t fight when she lifts my shirt over sore limbs. It’s stiff with blood, and I wince when she tugs it free. I inspect my cuts for the first time, raw and red and puffy. I suspect Grima Mog of not keeping her knife as clean as I’d like.

Taryn turns on the shower, adjusting the taps and then guiding me over the tub’s edge to stand in the warming spray. Being sisters, we’ve seen each other naked a bajillion times over the years, but as her gaze goes to the messy scar on my leg, I recall she’s never seen it before.

“Vivi said something,” Taryn says slowly. “About the night before my wedding. You were late, and when you came, you were quiet and pale. Sick. I worried it was because you still loved him, but Vivi insists that isn’t true. She says you got hurt.”

I nod. “I remember that night.”

“Did Locke … do something?” She isn’t looking at me now. Her gaze is on the tiles, then on a framed drawing Oak did of Heather, brown crayon for her skin bleeding into pink for her hair.

I grab the body wash that Vivi buys at the organic store, the one that’s supposed to be naturally antibacterial, and smear it liberally over the dried blood. It smells bleachy and stings like hell. “You mean, did he try to kill me?”

Taryn nods. I catch her eye. She already knows the answer. “Why didn’t you say something? Why did you let me marry him?” she demands.

“I didn’t know,” I admit. “I didn’t know it was Locke who’d led a hunt for me until I saw you wearing the earrings I lost that night. And then I got taken by the Undersea. And soon after I got back, you *betrayed* me, so I figured it didn’t matter.”

Taryn frowns, clearly torn between the urge to argue and an effort to stay quiet to win me over. A moment later, arguing triumphs. We’re twins, after all. “I just did what Dad said! I didn’t think it mattered. You had all that power and you wouldn’t use it. But I never wanted to hurt you.”

“I think I prefer Locke and his friends chasing me around the woods to you stabbing me in the back. Again.”

I can see her visibly stopping herself from saying anything more, taking a breath, biting her tongue. “I’m sorry,” she says, and slips out of the bathroom, leaving me to finish my shower alone.

I turn up the heat and take a long time.

When I come out, Heather has left, and Taryn has gone through the fridge and constructed some kind of nervous-energy tea party out of our leftovers. A big pot of tea sits at the center of the table, along with a smaller pot of the yarrow. She has taken our last half sleeve of gingersnap cookies and arranged them on a tray. Our bread got turned into two kinds of sandwiches: ham and celery, peanut butter and Cheerios.

Vivi is brewing a pot of coffee and watching Taryn with a worried expression. I pour myself a mug of the healing tea and drink it down, then pour myself another. Clean, bandaged, and dressed in new clothes, I feel a lot more clearheaded and ready to deal with the news that Locke is dead and that my twin sister murdered him.

I pick up a ham sandwich and take a bite. The celery is crunchy and a little weird, but not bad. Suddenly, I am aware of how hungry I am. I shove the rest of the sandwich into my mouth and pile two more onto a plate.

Taryn wrings her hands, pressing them together and then against her dress. “I snapped,” she says. Neither Vivi nor I speak. I try to crunch my celery more quietly.

“He promised he would love me until he died, but his love didn’t protect me from his unkindness. He warned me that the Folk don’t love as we do. I didn’t understand until he left me alone in his great, awful house for weeks on end. I cultivated hybrid roses in the garden and commissioned new curtains and hosted month-long revels for his friends. It didn’t matter. I was sometimes louche and sometimes chaste. I gave him *everything*. But he said that all the story had gone out of me.”

I raise my eyebrows. That was an awful thing for him to say, but not necessarily what I expected to be his last words. “I guess you showed him.”

Vivi laughs abruptly and then glares at me for making her laugh.

Taryn’s eyelashes sparkle with unshed tears. “I guess so,” she says in a flat, dull voice that I find hard to interpret. “I tried to explain how things had to change—they *had to*—but he acted as though I was being ridiculous. He kept *talking*, as if he could talk me out of my own feelings. There was a jeweled letter opener on the desk and—you remember all those lessons Madoc gave us? The next thing I knew, the point of it was in Locke’s throat. And then he was finally quiet, but when I took it out, there was so much blood.”

“So you didn’t mean to kill him?” Vivi asks.

Taryn doesn’t answer.

I get what it feels like to shove things down for long enough that they erupt. I also get what it’s like to shove a knife in somebody. “It’s okay,” I say, not sure if that’s true.

She turns to me. “I thought we were nothing alike, you and I. But it turns out we’re just the same.”

I don’t think she believes that to be a good thing.

“Where’s his body now?” I ask, trying to focus on the practical. “We need to get rid of it and—”

Taryn shakes her head. “His body was already discovered.”

“How? What did you do?” Before, I was frustrated she came to ask for help, but now I’m annoyed she didn’t come sooner, when I could have taken care of this.

“I dragged his body down to the waves. I thought the tide would carry him away, but he just washed up again on another beach. At least, um, at least some of him was chewed. It was harder for them to tell how he died.” She looks at me helplessly, as though she still can’t conceive how any of this is happening to her. “I’m not a bad person.”

I take a sip of my yarrow tea. “I didn’t say you were.”

“There’s going to be an inquest,” Taryn goes on. “They’re going to glamour me and ask questions. I won’t be able to lie. But if you answer in my place, you can say honestly that you didn’t kill him.”

“Jude is exiled,” Vivi says. “Banished until she gets the crown’s forgiveness or some other high-handed crap. If they catch her, they’ll kill her.”

“It will just be a few hours,” Taryn says, looking from one of us to the other. “And no one will know. Please.”

Vivi groans. “It’s too risky.”

I say nothing, which seems to be the thing that tips her off that I am considering it. “You want to go, don’t you?” Vivi asks, fixing me with a shrewd look. “You want an excuse to go back there. But once they glamour you, they’ll ask your name. Or ask something else that will tip them off when you don’t answer the way Taryn would. And then you’ll be screwed.”

I shake my head. “I had a geas placed on me. It protects me from glamours.” I hate how much the idea of returning to Elfhame thrills me, hate how much I want another bite at the everapple, another chance at power, another shot at him. Maybe there’s a way around my exile, too, if only I can find it.

Taryn frowns. “A geas? Why?”

Vivi fixes me with a glare. “Tell her. Tell her what you really did. Tell her what you are and why you can’t go back there.”

There’s something in Taryn’s face, a little like fear. Madoc must have explained that I’d gained a promise of obedience from Cardan—otherwise, how would she have known to order him to release half the army from their vows? Since I’ve been back in the mortal world, I’ve had a lot of time to go over what happened between us. I am sure Taryn was angry with me for not telling her about my hold over Cardan. I am sure Taryn was even angrier that I pretended I couldn’t persuade Cardan to dismiss Locke from being Master of Revels, when, in fact, I could have commanded him. But she had a lot of other reasons to help Madoc. After all, he was our father, too. Maybe she wanted to play the great game. Maybe she thought of all the things he could do for her if he were sitting on the throne.

“I should have told you everything, about Dain and the Court of Shadows, but —” I begin, but Vivi interrupts me.

“Skip that part,” she says. “Cut to the chase. *Tell her what you are*.”

“I’ve heard of the Court of Shadows,” says Taryn quickly. “They’re spies. Are you saying you’re a spy?”

I shake my head because I finally understand what Vivi wants me to explain. She wants me to say that Cardan married me and made me, effectively, High Queen of Elfhame. But I can’t. Every time I even think about it, I feel a rush of shame for believing he wasn’t going to play me. I don’t think I can explain any part of it without seeming like a fool, and I am not ready to be that vulnerable with Taryn.

I need to end this conversation, so I say the one thing I know will distract them both, for very different reasons. “I’ve decided to go and be Taryn in the inquest. I’ll be back in a day or two, and then I’ll explain everything to her. I promise.”

“Can’t you both just stay here in the mortal world?” Vivi asks. “Screw Faerie. Screw all this. We’ll get a bigger place.”

“Even if Taryn stays with us, it would be better for her not to skip out on the High King’s inquest,” I say. “And I can bring back stuff we can pawn for some easy cash. We’ve got to pay for that bigger place somehow.”

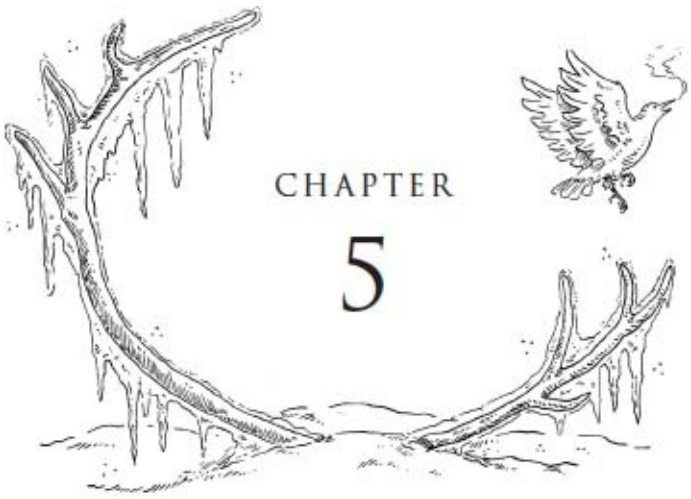
Vivi gives me an exasperated look. “We could stop living in apartments and playing at being mortal whenever you like. I did this for Heather. If it’s just us, we can take over one of the abandoned warehouses by the waterfront and glamour it so no one ever comes inside. We can steal all the money we need to buy anything at all. Just say the word, Jude.”

I take the five hundred dollars I fought for out of my jacket and place it on the table. “Bryern will be by with the other half later today. Since we’re still playing at being mortal. And since Heather is apparently still around. Now I am going to go take a nap. When I get up, I’m going to Faerie.”

Taryn looks at the money on the table with some confusion. “If you needed —”

“If you get caught, you’ll be executed, Jude,” Vivi reminds me, interrupting whatever offer Taryn was about to make. I’m glad. I might be willing to do this, but it certainly doesn’t mean I forgive her. Or that we’re close now. And I don’t want her acting as though it does.

“Then I won’t get caught,” I tell them both.



CHAPTER 5

Since Oak is at school, I curl up in his bed. As hurt as I am, sleep overtakes me quickly, sucking me down into darkness.

And dreams.

I am at lessons in the palace grove, sitting in the long shadows of the late afternoon. The moon has already risen, a sharp crescent in the cloudless blue sky. I draw a star chart from memory, my ink a dark red that clots on the paper. It's blood, I realize. I am dabbing my quill into an inkpot full of blood.

Across the grove, I see Prince Cardan, sitting with his usual companions. Valerian and Locke look strange: their clothing moth-eaten, their skin pallid, and only inky smudges where their eyes ought to be. Nicasia doesn't seem to notice. Her sea-colored hair hangs down her back in heavy coils; her lips are twisted into a mocking smile, as though nothing in the world is wrong. Cardan wears a bloodstained crown, tilted at an angle, the sharp planes of his face as hauntingly beautiful as ever.

"Do you remember what I said before I died?" Valerian calls to me in his taunting voice. "*I curse you. Three times, I curse you. As you've murdered me, may your hands always be stained with blood. May death be your only companion. May you*—That's when I died, so I never got to say the rest. Would you like to hear it now? *May your life be brief and shrouded in sorrow, and when you die, may you go unmourned*."

I shudder. “Yeah, that last bit really was the zinger.”

Cardan comes over, stepping on my star chart, kicking over the inkpot with his silver-tipped boots, sending the blood spilling across the paper, blotting out my marks. “Come with me,” he says imperiously.

“I knew you liked her,” says Locke. “That’s why I had to have her first. Do you remember the party in my maze garden? How I kissed her while you watched?”

“I recall that your hands were on her, but her eyes were on me,” Cardan returns.

“That’s not true!” I insist, but I remember Cardan on a blanket with a daffodil-haired faerie girl. She pressed her lips to the edge of his boot, and another girl kissed his throat. His gaze had turned to me when one of them began kissing his mouth. His eyes were coal-bright, as wet as tar.

The memory comes with the slide of Locke’s palm over my back, heat in my cheeks, and the feeling my skin was too tight, that everything was too much.

“Come with me,” Cardan says again, drawing me away from the blood-soaked star chart and the others taking their lessons. “I am a prince of Faerie. You have to do what I want.”

He leads me to the dappled shade of an oak tree, then lifts me up so I am seated on a low branch. He keeps his hands on my waist and moves closer, so that he’s standing between my thighs.

“Isn’t this better?” he says, gazing up at me.

I am not sure what he means, but I nod.

“You’re so beautiful.” He begins to trace patterns on my arms, then runs his hands down my sides. “So very beautiful.”

His voice is soft, and I make the mistake of looking into his black eyes, at his wicked, curving mouth.

“But your beauty will fade,” he continues, just as softly, speaking like a lover. His hands linger, making my stomach tighten and warmth pool in my belly. “This smooth skin will wrinkle and spot. It will become as thin as cobwebs. These breasts will droop. Your hair will grow dull and thin. Your teeth will yellow. And all you have and all you are will rot away to nothing. You will be nothing. You are nothing.”

“I’m nothing,” I echo, feeling helpless in the face of his words.

“You come from nothing, and it is to nothing you will return,” he whispers against my neck.

A sudden panic overtakes me. I need to get away from him. I push off the edge of the branch, but I don't hit the ground. I just fall and fall and fall through the air, dropping like Alice down the rabbit hole.

Then the dream changes. I am on a slab of stone, wrapped in fabric. I try to get up, but I can't move. It's as though I am a carved doll made of wood. My eyes are open, but I can't shift my head, can't blink, can't do anything. All I can do is stare at the same cloudless sky, the same sharp scythe of a moon.

Madoc comes into view, standing over me, looking down with his cat eyes. "It's a shame," he says, as though I am beyond hearing. "If only she stopped fighting me, I would have given her everything she ever wanted."

"She was never an obedient girl," says Oriana beside him. "Not like her sister."

Taryn is there, too, a delicate tear running over her cheek. "They were only ever going to let one of us survive. It was always going to be me. You're the sister who spits out toads and snakes. I'm the sister who spits out rubies and diamonds."

The three of them leave. Vivi stands beside me next, pressing her long fingers to my shoulder.

"I should have saved you," Vivi says. "It was always my job to save you."

"My funeral will be next," Oak whispers a moment later.

Nicasia's voice travels, as though she is speaking from far away. "They say faeries weep at weddings and laugh at funerals, but I thought your wedding and funeral were equally funny."

Then Cardan comes into view, a fond smile on his lips. When he speaks, he does so in a conspiratorial whisper. "When I was a child, we would stage burials, like little plays. The mortals were dead, of course, or at least they were by the end."

At that, I can finally speak. "You're lying," I say.

"Of course I'm lying," he returns. "This is your dream. Let me show you." He presses a warm hand against my cheek. "I love you, Jude. I've loved you for a long time. I will never stop loving you."

"Stop it!" I say.

Then it's Locke standing over me, water spilling from his mouth. "Let's be sure she's really dead." A moment later, he plunges a knife into my chest. It goes in over and over and over again.

At that, I wake, my face wet with tears and a scream in my throat.

I kick off my covers. Outside, it's dark. I must have slept the whole day away. Flicking on the lights, I take deep breaths, check my brow for fever. I wait for my jangling nerves to settle. The more I think about the dream, the more disturbed I am.

I go out to the living room, where I find a pizza box open on the coffee table. Someone has placed dandelion heads beside the pepperoni on a few of the slices. Oak is trying to explain *Rocket League* to Taryn.

Both of them look over at me warily.

"Hey," I say to my twin. "Can I talk to you?"

"Sure," Taryn says, getting up from the couch.

I walk back into Oak's bedroom and perch on the edge of his bed. "I need to know if you came here because you were told to come," I say. "I need to know if this is a trap set by the High King to lure me into violating the terms of my exile."

Taryn looks surprised, but to her credit, she doesn't ask me why I would think such a thing. One of her hands goes to her stomach, fingers spreading over her belly. "No," she says. "But I didn't tell you everything."

I wait, unsure what she's talking about.

"I've been thinking about Mom," she says finally. "I always thought she left Elfhame because she fell in love with our mortal dad, but now I'm not so sure."

"I don't understand," I say.

"I'm pregnant," she says, her voice a whisper.

For centuries, mortals have been valued for their ability to conceive faerie children. Our blood is less sluggish than that of the Folk. Faerie women would be fortunate to bear a single child over the course of their long lives. Most never will. But a mortal wife is another matter. I knew all that, and yet it never occurred to me that Taryn and Locke would conceive a child.

"Wow," I say, my gaze going to her hand spread protectively over her stomach. "Oh."

"No one should have the childhood we had," she says.

Had she imagined bringing up a child in that house, with Locke messing with both of their heads? Or was it because she imagined that if she left, he might hunt her down as Madoc hunted down our mother? I am not sure. And I am not sure I should push her, either. Now that I am better rested, I can see in her the signs of exhaustion I missed before. The red-rimmed eyes. A certain sharpness to her features that marks forgetting to eat.

I realize that she has come to us because she has nowhere else to go—and she had to believe there was every chance I wouldn't help her.

"Did he know?" I ask finally.

"Yes," she says, and pauses as though she's recalling that conversation. And possibly the murder. "But I haven't told anyone else. No one but you. And telling Locke went—well, you already heard how it went."

I don't know what to say to that, but when she makes a helpless gesture toward me, I come into her arms, leaning my head on her shoulder. I know there are a lot of things I ought to have told her and a lot she ought to have told me. I know we haven't been kind. I know she's hurt me, more than she can guess. But for all that, she's still my sister. My widowed, murderer sister with a baby on the way.

An hour later, I am packed and ready to leave. Taryn has drilled me in the details of her day, about the Folk she talks to regularly, about the running of Locke's estate. She has given me a pair of gloves to disguise my missing finger. She has changed out of her elegant dress of gossamer and spun glass. I am wearing it now, my hair arranged in a rough estimation of hers while she wears my black leggings and sweater.

"Thank you," she says, a thing the Folk never say. Thanks are considered rude, trivializing the complicated dance of debt and repayment. But that's not what mortals mean by thanking one another. That's not what they mean at all.

Still, I shrug off her words. "No worries."

Oak comes over to be picked up, even though at eight he is all long limbs and gangly boy body. "Squeeze hug," he says, which means he jumps up and wraps his arms around your neck, half-strangling you. I submit to this and squeeze him back hard, slightly out of breath.

Setting him down, I pull off my ruby ring—the one Cardan stole and then returned to me during our exchange of vows. One I can definitely not have with me while posing as Taryn. "Will you keep this safe? Just until I get back."

"I will," Oak says solemnly. "Come back soon. I'll miss you."

I am surprised by his sweetness, especially after our last encounter.

"Soon as I can," I promise, pressing a kiss to his brow. Then I go to the kitchen. Vivi is waiting for me. Together, we walk out onto the grass, where she has cultivated a small patch of ragwort.

Taryn trails after us, pulling at the sleeve of the sweater she's wearing.

"You're sure about this?" Vivi asks, plucking a plant at the root. I look at her, shrouded in shadows, her hair lit by the streetlamp. It usually looks brown like mine, but in the right light it is woven through with strands of a gold that is almost green.

Vivi has never hungered for Faerie as I have. How can she, when she carries it with her wherever she goes?

"You know I'm sure," I say. "Now, are you going to tell me what happened with Heather?"

She shakes her head. "Stay alive if you want to find out." Then she blows on the ragwort. "Steed, rise and bear my sister where she commands." By the time the flowering stem falls to the ground, it is already changing into an emaciated yellow pony with emerald eyes and a mane of lacy fronds.

It snorts at the air and strikes the ground with its hooves, almost as eager to fly as I am.

Locke's estate is as I remembered it—tall spires and mossy tiles, covered in a thick curtain of honeysuckle and ivy. A hedge maze crosses the grounds in a dizzying pattern. The whole place looks straight out of a fairy tale, the kind where love is a simple thing, never the cause of pain.

At night, the human world looks as though it's full of fallen stars. The words come to me suddenly, what Locke said when we stood together at the top of his tallest tower.

I urge the ragwort horse to land, and swing down from its back, leaving it pawing the ground as I head toward the grand front doors. They slide open at my approach. A pair of servants stand just inside, mushroomy skin so pale that their veins are visible, giving them the appearance of a matched set of old marble statues. Small, powdery wings sag from their shoulders. They regard my approach with their cold, inkdrop eyes, recalling to me all at once the inhumanity of the Folk.

I take a deep breath and draw myself to my full height. Then I head inside.

"Welcome back, my lady," the female says. They are brother and sister, Taryn informed me. Nera and Neve. Their debt was to Locke's father, but they were left behind when he departed, to serve out the rest of their time taking care of his

son. They snuck around before, staying out of sight, but Taryn forbade them from doing so after she came to live there.

In the mortal world, I have become acclimated to thanking people for small services and now have to bite back the words. “It’s good to be home,” I say instead, and sweep past them into the hall.

It’s changed from what I remember. Before, the rooms were largely empty, and where they were not, the furniture was old and heavy, the upholstery stiff with age. The long dining table had been bare, as had been the floors. Not anymore.

Cushions and rugs, goblets and trays and half-full decanters cover every surface—all of them in a riot of colors: vermilion and umber, peacock blue and bottle green, gold and damson plum. The coverlet of a daybed is smeared with a thin golden powder, perhaps from a recent guest. I frown a moment too long, my reflection mirrored back to me in a polished silver urn.

The servants are watching, and I have no cause to study rooms with which I am supposed to be familiar. So I try to smooth out my expression. To hide that I am puzzling out the parts of Taryn’s life she didn’t tell me about.

She designed these rooms, I am sure. Her bed in Madoc’s stronghold was always massed with bright pillows. She loves beautiful things. And yet, I cannot miss that this is a place made for bacchanalia, for decadence. She spoke of hosting month-long revels, but only now do I imagine her spread out on the pillows, drunk and laughing and maybe kissing people. Maybe doing more than kissing people.

My sister, my twin, was always more lark than grackle, more shy than sensualist. Or at least I thought she was. While I walked the path of daggers and poison, she walked the no-less-fraught path of desire.

I turn toward the stairs, unsure that I am going to pull this off after all. I go back over what I know, over the explanation that Taryn and I came up with together for the last time I saw Locke. He had been planning to meet with a selkie, I will say, with whom he was carrying on an affair. It was plausible, after all. And the Undersea had so recently been at odds with the land that I hope Folk will be inclined against them.

“Will you take dinner in the grand hall?” Neve asks, trailing behind me.

“I’d prefer a tray in my room,” I say, unwilling to eat alone at that long table and be waited on in conspicuous silence.

Up I go, fairly sure I recall the way. I open a door with trepidation. For a moment, I think I am in the wrong place, but it is only that Locke’s room has

changed, too. The bed is bedecked in curtains embroidered with foxes stalking through tall trees. A low divan sits in front of the bed, where a few gowns are scattered, and a small desk is cluttered with paper and pens.

I go to Taryn's dressing chamber and look at her dresses—a collection less riotous in color than the furnishings she chose, but no less beautiful. I choose a shift and a heavy satin robe to wear over it, then strip off her dress of gossamer and glass.

The fabric shivers against my skin. I stand in front of the mirror in her bedroom and comb out my hair. I stare at myself, trying to see what might give me away. I am more muscular, but clothes can hide that. My hair is shorter, but not by much. And then, of course, there's my temper.

"Greetings, Your Majesty," I say, trying to imagine myself in the High Court again. What would Taryn do? I sink into a low curtsy. "It's been too long."

Of course, Taryn probably saw him quite recently. For her, it hasn't been long at all. Panic drums in my chest. I am going to have to do more than answer questions at the inquest. I am going to have to pretend that I am a cordial acquaintance of High King Cardan *to his face*.

I fix myself with a look in the mirror, trying to summon the correct expression of deference, trying not to scowl. "Greetings, Your Majesty, you betraying toad."

No, that wouldn't work, no matter how good it felt.

"Greetings, Your Majesty," I try again. "I didn't kill my husband, even though he richly deserved it."

There is a knock on the door, and I startle.

Nera has brought a large wooden tray, which he sets on the bed and then departs with a bow, barely making a sound as he goes. On it are toast and a marmalade with a cloying, strange scent that makes my mouth water. It takes longer than it ought for me to realize it's *faerie fruit*. And they've brought it as though it's nothing to Taryn, as though she eats it regularly. Did Locke give it to her without her knowing? Or did she take it deliberately, as a sort of recreational blurring of the senses? Once again, I am lost.

At least there's also a pot of nettle tea, soft cheese, and three hard-boiled duck eggs. It's a simple dinner, other than the weirdness of the faerie fruit.

I drink the tea and eat the eggs and toast. The marmalade, I hide in a napkin that I tuck in the very back of the closet. If Taryn finds it moldering weeks from now, well, that's a small price to pay for the favor she's getting out of me.

I look at the dresses again, try to choose one for the day ahead. Nothing whimsical. My husband is supposed to be dead, and I am supposed to be sad. Unfortunately, while Taryn's commissions for me were almost entirely black, her own closet is empty of the color. I push past silk and satin, past brocade in the pattern of forests with animals peeking out from between the leaves, and embroidered velvets of sage green and sky blue. Finally, I settle on a dark bronze dress and drag it over to the divan, along with a pair of midnight blue gloves. I rifle through her jewelry box and pull out the earrings I gave her. One a moon, the other a star, crafted by the master smith Grimsen, magicked to make the wearer more beautiful.

I itch to sneak out of Locke's demesne and back into the Court of Shadows. I want nothing more than to visit the Roach and the Bomb, to hear gossip from the Court, to be in those familiar underground rooms. But those rooms are gone—destroyed by the Ghost when he betrayed us to the Undersea. I don't know where the Court of Shadows operates out of now.

And I can't risk it.

Opening the window, I sit at Taryn's desk and sip nettle tea, drinking in the sharp salt scent of the sea and the wild honeysuckle and the distant breeze through fir trees. I take a deep breath, at home and homesick all at the same time.

The inquest is set to happen when the first of the stars is visible in the sky. I arrive at the High Court in Taryn's bronze dress, with a shawl over my shoulders, gloves on my fingers, and my hair swept into a loose chignon. My heart races, and I hope that no one can sense the nervous sweat starting under my arms.

As the High King's seneschal, I was accorded a certain kind of deference. Although I lived eight years in Elfhame without it, I got very used to it very quickly.

As Taryn, I am watched with suspicion when I push my way through a crowd that no longer automatically parts for me. She is the daughter of a traitor, the sister of an outcast, and the suspected murderer of her husband. Their gazes are greedy, as though they hope for the spectacle of her guilt and punishment. But they still are not afraid of her. Even with her alleged crime, they see her as a mortal and weak.

Good, I suppose. The weaker she seems, the more believable her innocence.

My gaze darts away from the dais even as I move toward it. High King Cardan's presence seems to infect the very air I breathe. For a wild moment, I consider turning and getting out of there before he spots me.

I don't know if I can do this.

I feel a little dizzy.

I don’t know if I can look at him and not show on my face any of what I am feeling.

I take a deep breath and let it out again, reminding myself that he won’t know I’m the one standing in front of him. He didn’t recognize Taryn when she dressed in my clothes, and he won’t recognize me now.

Plus, I tell myself, *if you don’t pull this off, you and Taryn are both in a lot of trouble*.

I am suddenly reminded of all the reasons Vivi told me this was a bad idea. She’s right. This is ridiculous. I am supposed to be exiled until such time as I am pardoned by the crown, on pain of death.

It occurs to me that maybe he made a mistake with that phrasing. Maybe I can pardon myself. But then I remember when I insisted I was the Queen of Faerie, and the guards laughed. Cardan didn’t need to deny me. He only had to say nothing. And if I pardoned myself, he would only have to say nothing again.

No, if he recognizes me, I will have to run and hide and hope that my training with the Court of Shadows wins out over the training of the guard. But then the Court will know that Taryn is guilty—otherwise, why have me stand in her stead? And if I don’t manage to escape …

Idly, I wonder what sort of execution Cardan might order. Maybe he’d strap me to some rocks and let the sea do the work. Nicasia would like that. If he’s not in the mood, though, there’s also beheading, hanging, exsanguination, drawn and quartered, fed whole to a riding toad …

“Taryn Duarte,” says a knight, interrupting my morose thoughts. His voice is cold, his chased silver armor marking him as one of Cardan’s personal guard. “Wife of Locke. You must stand in the place of petitioners.”

I move there, disoriented at the thought of standing where I had seen so many before when I was the seneschal. Then I remember myself and make the deep curtsy of someone comfortable with submission to the High King’s will. Since I cannot do that while looking at his face, I make sure that I keep my gaze on the ground.

“Taryn?” Cardan asks, and the sound of his voice, the familiarity of it, is shocking.

With no more excuses, I raise my eyes to his.

He is even more horrifically beautiful than I was able to recall. They’re all beautiful, unless they’re hideous. That’s the nature of the Folk. Our mortal minds cannot conceive of them; our memory blunts their power.

His every finger sparks with a ring. An etched and jeweled breastplate in polished gold hangs from his shoulders, covering a frothy white shirt. Boots curl up at his toes and rise high over his knees. His tail is visible, curled to one side of his leg. I suppose he has decided it is no longer something he needs to hide. At his brow, of course, is the Blood Crown.

He regards me with gold-rimmed black eyes, a smirk hovering at the corners of his mouth. His black hair tumbles around his face, unbound and a little messy, as though he's recently risen from someone's bed.

I can't stop marveling at how I once had power over him, over *the High King of Faerie*. How I once was arrogant enough to believe I could keep it.

I remember the slide of his mouth on mine. I remember how he tricked me.

"Your Majesty," I say, because I have to say something and because everything I practiced began with that.

"We recognize your grief," he says, sounding annoyingly regal. "We would not disturb your mourning were it not for questions over the cause of your husband's death."

"Do you really think she's sad?" asks Nicasia. She is standing beside a woman it takes me a moment to place: Cardan's mother, Lady Asha, done up in a silvery dress, jeweled tips covering the points of her horns. Lady Asha's face has been highlighted in silver as well—silver along her cheekbones and shining on her lips. Nicasia, meanwhile, wears the colors of the sea. Her gown is the green of kelp, deep and rich. Her aqua hair is braided up and adorned with a cunning crown made of fish bones and jaws.

At least neither of them is on the dais beside the High King. The position of seneschal appears still to be open.

I want to snap at Nicasia, but Taryn wouldn't, so I don't. I say nothing, cursing myself for knowing what Taryn *wouldn't* do, but being less sure what she *would*.

Nicasia steps closer, and I am surprised to see sorrow in her face. Locke was her friend, once, and her lover. I don't think he was particularly good at either, but I guess that doesn't mean she wanted him dead. "Did you kill Locke yourself?" she asks. "Or did you get your sister to do it for you?"

"Jude is in exile," I say, my words coming out dangerously soft instead of the regular kind of soft they were intended to be. "And I've never hurt Locke."

"No?" Cardan says, leaning forward on his throne. Vines shiver behind him. His tail twitches.

“I lov …” I can’t quite make my mouth say the words, but they are waiting. I force them out and try to force out a little sob, too. “I loved him.”

“Sometimes I believed that you did, yes,” Cardan says absently. “But you could well be lying. I am going to put a glamour on you. All it will do is force you to tell us the truth.” He curves his hand, and magic shimmers in the air.

I feel nothing. Such is the power of Dain’s geas, I suppose. Not even the High King’s glamour can ensorcell me.

“Now,” says Cardan. “Tell me only the truth. What is your name?”

“Taryn Duarte,” I say with a curtsy, grateful at how easy the lie comes. “Daughter of Madoc, wife of Locke, subject of the High King of Elfhame.”

His mouth curves. “What fine courtly manners.”

“I was well instructed.” He ought to know. We were instructed together.

“Did you murder Locke?” he asks. Around me, the hum of conversation slows. There are no songs, little laughter, few clinks of cups. The Folk are intent, wondering if I am about to confess.

“No,” I say, and give a pointed look to Nicasia. “Nor did I orchestrate his death. Perhaps we ought to look to the *sea*, where he was found.”

Nicasia turns her attention to Cardan. “We know that Jude murdered Balekin. She confessed as much. And I have long suspected her of killing Valerian. If Taryn isn’t the culprit, then Jude must be. Queen Orlagh, my mother, swore a truce with you. What possible gain could she have from the murder of your Master of Revels? She knew he was your friend—and mine.” Her voice breaks at the end, although she tries to mask it. Her grief is obviously genuine.

I try to summon tears. It would be useful to cry right now, but standing in front of Cardan, I cannot weep.

He peers down at me, black brows drawn together. “Well, what do you think? Did your sister do it? And don’t tell me what I already know. Yes, I sent Jude into exile. That may or may not have deterred her.”

I wish I could punch him in his smug face and show him how undeterred I am by his exile. “She had no reason to hate Locke,” I lie. “I don’t think she wished him ill.”

“Is that so?” Cardan says.

“Perhaps it is only Court gossip, but there is a popular tale about you, your sister, and Locke,” Lady Asha ventures. “She loved him, but he chose you. Some sisters cannot bear to see the other happy.”

Cardan glances at his mother. I wonder what has drawn her to Nicasia, unless it is only that they are both awful. And I wonder what Nicasia makes of her.

Orlagh might be a ferocious and terrifying Queen of the Undersea, and I never want to spend another moment in her presence, but I believe she cherishes Nicasia. Surely Nicasia would expect more of Cardan's mother than the thin gruel of emotion she has served her son.

"Jude never loved Locke." My face feels hot, but my shame is an excellent cover to hide behind. "She loved someone else. He's the one she'd want dead."

I am pleased to see Cardan flinch. "Enough," he says before I can go on. "I have heard all I care to on this subject—"

"No!" Nicasia interrupts, causing everyone under the hill to stir a little. It is immense presumption to interrupt the High King. Even for a princess. Especially for an ambassador. A moment after she speaks, she seems to realize it, but she goes on anyway. "Taryn could have a charm on her, something that makes her resistant to glamours."

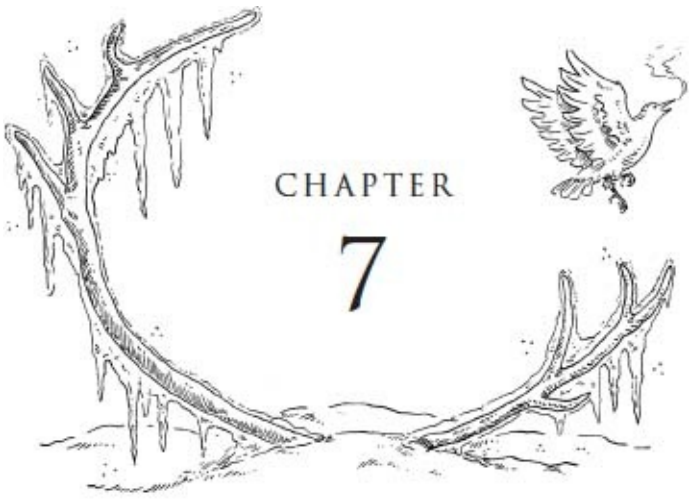
Cardan gives Nicasia a scathing look. He does not like her undermining his authority. And yet, after a moment, his anger gives way to something else. He gives me one of his most awful smiles. "I suppose she'll have to be searched."

Nicasia's mouth curves to match his. It feels like being back at lessons on the palace grounds, conspired against by the children of the Gentry.

I recall the more recent humiliation of being crowned the Queen of Mirth, stripped in front of revelers. If they take my gown now, they will see the bandages on my arms, the fresh slashes on my skin for which I have no good explanation. They will guess I am not Taryn.

I can't let that happen. I summon all the dignity I can muster, trying to imitate my stepmother, Oriana, and the way she projects authority. "My husband was murdered," I say. "And whether or not you believe me, I do mourn him. I will not make a spectacle of myself for the Court's amusement when his body is barely cold."

Unfortunately, the High King's smile only grows. "As you wish. Then I suppose I will have to examine you alone in my chambers."



CHAPTER 7

I am furious as I walk through the corridors of the palace, steps behind Cardan, followed by his guard to keep me from trying to slip away.

My choices now are not good.

He will take me back to his enormous chambers and then what? Will he force a guard to hold me and divest me of anything that might protect me from glamour—jewelry, clothing—until I am stripped bare? If so, he cannot fail to notice my scars, scars he has seen before. And if he peels off my gloves, there can be no doubt. The missing half digit will give me away.

If I am undressed, he will know me.

I am going to have to make a break for it. There's the secret passageway in his rooms. From there, I can get out through one of the crystal windows.

I glance at the guards. If they were dismissed, I could get past Cardan, through the secret passageway, and out. But how to get rid of them?

I consider the smile Cardan wore on the dais when he announced what he was going to do to me. Maybe he *wants* to see Taryn naked. He desired *me*, after all, and Taryn and I are identical. Perhaps if I volunteer to undress myself, he'll agree to dismiss his guard. He did say he'd examine me alone.

Which leads me to an even more daring thought. Maybe I could distract him thoroughly enough that he wouldn't know me at all. Perhaps I could blow out the candles and be naked only in the half light. …

Those thoughts occupy me so completely that I barely notice a hooved servant carrying a tray supporting a carafe of a pale celery-green wine and a collection of blown-glass goblets. She is coming from the opposite direction, and when we pass, the tray digs into my side. She gives a cry, I feel a shove, and we both tumble to the floor, glass shattering around us.

The guards halt. Cardan turns. I look over at the girl, baffled and surprised. My dress is soaked with wine. The Folk are seldom clumsy, and this doesn't feel like an accident. Then the girl's fingers touch one of my gloved hands. I feel the press of leather and steel against the inside of my wrist. She is pushing a sheathed knife up my sleeve under cover of cleaning up the spilled contents of the tray. Her head dips close to mine as she brushes shards of glass from my hair.

"Your father is coming for you," she whispers. "Wait for a signal. Then stab the guard closest to the door and run."

"What signal?" I whisper back, pretending to help her sweep up the debris.

"Oh no, my lady, your pardon," she says in a normal voice with a bob of her head. "You ought not lower yourself."

One of the High King's personal guard catches my arm. "Come along," he says, lifting me to my feet. I press my hands to my heart to keep the knife from slipping out my sleeve.

I resume my walk toward Cardan's rooms, my thoughts thrown into even more confusion.

Madoc is coming to save Taryn. It's a reminder that while I am no longer in his good graces, she helped him wriggle out of his vows of service to the High King. She gave him half an army. I wonder what plans he has for her, what rewards he's promised. I imagine he will be pleased to have her no longer encumbered with Locke.

But when Madoc comes, what's his plan? Whom is he expecting to fight? And what will he do when he comes for her and finds me instead?

Two servants open heavy double doors to the High King's chambers, and he goes inside, throwing himself down on a low couch. I follow, standing awkwardly in the middle of the carpet. None of the guards so much as enter his chambers. As soon as I step over the threshold, the doors shut behind me, this time with a grim finality. I don't have to worry about persuading Cardan to dismiss the guard; they never lingered.

At least I have a knife.

The parlor is as I remember it from Council meetings. It carries the scent of smoke and verbena and clover. Cardan himself lounges, his booted feet resting on a stone table carved in the shape of a griffin, claws raised to strike. He gives me a quicksilver, conspiratorial grin that seems completely at odds with the way he spoke to me from his throne.

"Well," he says, patting the couch beside him. "Didn't you get my letters?"

"What?" I am confused enough that the word comes out like a croak.

"You never replied to a one," he goes on. "I began to wonder if you'd misplaced your ambition in the mortal world."

This must be a test. This must be a trap.

"Your Majesty," I say stiffly. "I thought you brought me here to assure yourself I had neither charm nor amulet."

A single eyebrow rises, and his smile deepens. "I will if you like. Shall I command you to remove your clothes? I don't mind."

"What are you *doing*?" I say finally, desperately. "What are you playing at?"

He's looking at me as though somehow I am the one who's behaving strangely. "Jude, you can't really think I don't know it's you. I knew you from the moment you walked into the brugh."

I shake my head, reeling. "That's not possible." If he knew it was me, then I wouldn't be here. I would be imprisoned in the Tower of Forgetting. I would be preparing for my execution.

But maybe he's *pleased* I violated the terms of the exile. Maybe he's glad I put myself in his power by doing so. Maybe that's his game.

He stands up from the couch, his gaze intense. "Come closer."

I take a step backward.

He frowns. "My councilors told me that you met with an ambassador from the Court of Teeth, that you must be working with Madoc now. I was unwilling to believe it, but seeing the way you look at me, perhaps I must. Tell me it's not true."

For a moment, I don't understand, but then I do. Grima Mog. "I'm not the betrayer here," I say, but I am suddenly conscious of the blade in my sleeve.

"Are you angry about—" He cuts himself off, looking at my face more carefully. "No, you're *afraid*. But why would you be afraid of me?"

I am trembling with a feeling that I barely understand. "I'm not," I lie. "I hate you. You sent me into exile. Everything you say to me, everything you promise, it's all a trick. And I, stupid enough to believe you once." The sheathed knife slides easily to my hand.

“Of course it was a trick—” he begins, then sees the weapon and bites off whatever he was about to say.

Everything shakes. An explosion, close by and intense enough that we both stumble. Books fall and scatter over the floor. Crystal orbs slip off their stands to roll across floorboards. Cardan and I look at each other in shared surprise. Then his eyes narrow in accusation.

This is the part where I am supposed to stab him and run.

A moment later, there’s the unmistakable sound of metal striking metal. Close by.

“Stay here,” I say, drawing the blade and tossing the sheath onto the ground.

“Jude, don’t—” he calls after me as I slip into the hall.

One of his guard lies dead, a polearm jutting out of her rib cage. Others clash with Madoc’s handpicked soldiers, battle-hardened and deadly. I know them, know that they fight without pity, without mercy, and if they’ve made it this close to the High King, Cardan is in terrible danger.

I think again of the passageway I was planning to slip through. I can get him out that way—in exchange for a pardon. Either Cardan can end my exile and live or hope his guard wins against Madoc’s soldiers. I am about to head back to put that deal to him when one of the helmeted soldiers grabs hold of me.

“I have Taryn,” she calls gruffly. I recognize her: Silja. Part huldra and entirely terrifying. I’d seen her carve up a partridge in a way that made her delight in slaughter very clear.

I stab at her hand, but the thick hide of her gloves turns my blade. A steel-covered arm wraps around my waist.

“Daughter,” Madoc says in his gravelly voice. “Daughter, don’t be afraid—”

His hand comes up with a cloth smelling of cloying sweetness. He presses it over my nose and mouth. I feel my limbs go loose, and a moment later, I feel nothing at all.

CHAPTER 8

When I wake, I am in woods I don't recognize. I don't smell the ubiquitous salt of the sea, and I don't hear the crash of the waves. Everything is ferns, leaf mold, the crackle of a fire, and the hum of distant voices. I sit up. I am lying on heavy blankets, with more on top of me—horse blankets, albeit elegant ones. I see a solidly built carriage nearby, the door hanging open.

I am still in Taryn's dress, still wearing her gloves.

"Don't mind the dizziness," says a kind voice. Oriana. She is sitting nearby, dressed in a gown of what appears to be felted wool over several layers of skirts. Her hair is pulled back into a green cap. She looks nothing like the diaphanous courtier she's been the whole time I've known her. "It will pass."

I run a hand through my hair, come loose now, the pins still in it. "Where are we? What happened?"

"Your father didn't like the thought of your staying on the isles to begin with, but without Locke's protection, it was only a matter of time before the High King came up with an excuse to make you his hostage."

I rub a hand over my face. By the fire, a spindly, insectile faerie stirs a big pot. "You want soup, mortal?"

I shake my head.

"You want to be soup?" it asks hopefully. Oriana waves it off and takes a kettle from the ground beside the fire. She pours the steaming contents into a

wooden cup. The liquid is redolent of bark and mushrooms.

I take a sip and abruptly feel less dizzy.

"Was the High King captured?" I ask, recalling when I was taken. "Is he alive?"

"Madoc was unable to get to him," she says, as though his being alive is a disappointment.

I hate how relieved I feel.

"But—" I start, meaning to ask how the battle ended. I remember myself in time to bite my tongue. Over the years, Taryn and I have occasionally pretended to be each other at home. We mostly got away with it, so long as it didn't go on for too long or we weren't too obvious about it. If I don't do anything stupid, I have a good chance of pulling this off until I can escape.

And then what?

Cardan was so disarmingly casual, as though sentencing me to death was some shared joke between us. And talking of messages, messages I never got. What could they have said? Could he have intended to pardon me? Could he have offered me some kind of bargain?

I cannot imagine a letter from Cardan. Would it have been short and formal? Full of gossip? Wine-stained? Another trick?

Of course it was a trick.

Whatever he intended, he must believe I am working with Madoc now. And though it shouldn't bother me, it does.

"Your father's priority was to get you out," Oriana reminds me.

"Not just that, right?" I say. "He can't have attacked the Palace of Elfhame for me alone." My thoughts are unruly, chasing one another around. I am no longer sure of anything.

"I don't question Madoc's plans," she says neutrally. "Nor should you."

I forgot how it felt to be bossed around by Oriana, always treated as though my curiosity would immediately create some scandal for our family. It's especially galling to be treated this way now, when her husband stole half an army from the High King and is planning a coup against him.

Grima Mog's words echo in my mind. *The Court of Teeth have thrown in their lot with the old Grand General—your father—and a whole host of other traitors. I have it on good authority that your High King is to be dethroned before the next full moon.*

That seems a lot more pressing now.

But since I am supposed to be Taryn, I don't respond. After a moment, she looks repentant. "The important thing is for you to rest. I am sure being dragged out here is a lot to take in on top of losing Locke."

"Yes," I say. "It is a lot. I think I do want to rest awhile, if that's all right."

Oriana reaches over and smooths my hair back from my brow, a fond gesture that I am sure she wouldn't have made if she knew it was me, Jude, that she was touching. Taryn admires Oriana, and they're close in a way that she and I are not—for many reasons, not the least of which is that I helped hide Oak in the mortal world, away from the crown. Since then, Oriana has been both grateful and resentful. But in Taryn, I think, Oriana sees someone she understands. And maybe Taryn *is* like Oriana, although the murder of Locke has called that and everything else I thought I knew about my twin sister into question.

I close my eyes. Although I mean to puzzle through how to get away, instead I sleep.

The next time I wake, I am in a carriage, and we are on the move. Madoc and Oriana sit on the opposite bench. The curtains are drawn, but I hear the sounds of a traveling camp, of mounts and soldiers. I hear the distinctive growl of goblins calling to one another.

I look over at the redcap who raised me, my father and the murderer of my father. I take in the whiskers from a few days of not shaving. His familiar, inhuman face. He looks exhausted.

"Finally up?" he says with a smile that shows too many teeth. I am uncomfortably reminded of Grima Mog.

I try to smile back as I straighten. I don't know whether something in the soup knocked me out or the deathsweet Madoc made me inhale isn't out of my system, but I don't remember being loaded into the carriage. "How long was I asleep?"

Madoc makes a negligent gesture. "The High King's trumped-up inquest is three days past."

I feel fuzzy-headed, afraid I will say the wrong thing and be discovered. At least my easy slide into unconsciousness must have made me seem to be my sister. Before I became a captive of the Undersea, I'd trained my body to be immune to poisons. But now I am exactly as vulnerable as Taryn.

If I keep my wits about me, I can get away without either of them knowing. I consider what part of Madoc's conversation Taryn would focus on. Probably the matter of Locke. I take a deep breath. "I told them I hadn't done it. Even glamoured, I insisted."

Madoc doesn’t look as though he sees through my disguise, but he does look as though he thinks I am being an idiot. “I doubt that boy king ever intended to let you walk out of the Palace of Elfhame alive. He fought hard to keep you.”

“Cardan?” That doesn’t sound like him.

“Half my knights never made it out,” he informs me grimly. “We got in easily enough, but the brugh itself closed around us. Doorways cracked and shrank. Vines and roots and leaves obstructed our way, closed like vises on our necks, crushed and strangled us.”

I stare at him for a long moment. “And the High King caused that?” I can’t believe it of Cardan, whom I left in his chambers, as though he was the one in need of protecting.

“His guard were neither poorly trained nor poorly chosen, and he knows his power. I am glad to have tested him before going against him in earnest.”

“Are you sure it’s wise to go against him at all, then?” I ask carefully. It is perhaps not exactly what Taryn would say, but it’s not exactly what I would say, either.

“Wisdom is for the meek,” he returns. “And it seldom helps them as much as they believe it will. After all, as wise as you are, you still married Locke. Of course, perhaps you are wiser than even that—perhaps you’re so wise you made yourself a widow, too.”

Oriana puts her hand on his knee, a cautioning gesture.

He gives a great laugh. “What? I made no secret of how little I liked the boy. You can hardly expect me to mourn him.”

I wonder if he would laugh so hard if he knew Taryn had actually done it. Who am I kidding? He would probably laugh even harder. He would probably laugh himself sick.

Eventually, the carriage stops, and Madoc jumps down, calling to his soldiers. I slide out and look around, at first disoriented by the unfamiliar landscape and then by the sight of the army before me.

Snow covers the ground, and huge bonfires dot it, along with a maze of tents. Some are made of animal skins. Others are elaborate affairs of painted canvas and wool and silk. But what is most astonishing is how big the camp is, full of soldiers armed and ready to move against the High King. Behind the

encampment, a little to the west, is a mountain girded in a thick green pelt of fir trees. And beside it, another tiny outpost—a single tent and a few soldiers.

I feel very far away from the mortal world.

"Where are we?" I ask Oriana, who steps out of the carriage behind me, carrying a cloak to place over my shoulders.

"Near the Court of Teeth," she says. "It's mostly trolls and huldra up this far north."

The Court of Teeth is the Unseelie Court that held the Roach and the Bomb prisoner, and who exiled Grima Mog. The absolute last place I want to be—and with no clear path to escape.

"Come," Oriana says. "Let's get you settled."

She leads me through the camp, past a group of trolls skinning a moose, past elves and goblins singing war songs, past a tailor repairing a pile of hide armor before a fire. In the distance, I hear the clang of steel, raised voices, and animal sounds. The air is thick with smoke, and the ground is muddy from trampling boots and snowmelt. Disoriented, I focus on not losing Oriana in the throng. Finally, we come to a large but practical-looking tent, with a pair of sturdy wooden chairs in front, both covered in sheepskin.

My gaze is drawn to an elaborate pavilion nearby. It sits off the ground on golden clawed feet, looking for all the world as though it could scuttle off if its owner gave the command. As I stare, Grimsen steps out. Grimsen the Smith, who created the Blood Crown and many more artifacts of Faerie yet hungers for greater and greater fame. He's arrayed so finely that he might be a prince himself. When he sees me, he gives me a sly look. I avert my eyes.

The inside of Madoc and Oriana's tent reminds me uncomfortably of home. A corner of it works as a makeshift kitchen, where dried herbs hang in garlands beside dried sausages and butter and cheese.

"You can have a bath," Oriana says, indicating a copper tub in another corner, half-filled with snow. "We place a metal bar on the fire, then plunge it into the melt, and everything heats up swiftly enough."

I shake my head, thinking of how I need to continue to hide my hands. At least in this cold, it will be no surprise for me to keep my gloves on. "I just want to wash my face. And maybe put on some warmer clothes?"

"Of course," she says, and bustles around the small space to gather up a sturdy blue dress, some hose, and boots. She goes out and comes back. After a few minutes, a servant arrives with steaming water in a bowl and places it on a table, along with a cloth. The water is scented with juniper.

“I will leave you to freshen up,” Oriana says, putting on a cloak. “Tonight we dine with the Court of Teeth.”

“I don’t mean to inconvenience you,” I say, awkward in the face of her kindness, knowing that it isn’t for me.

She smiles and touches my cheek. “You’re a good girl,” she says, making me flush with embarrassment.

I am never that.

Still, when she is gone, I am glad to be alone. I snoop around the tent but find no maps or battle plans. I eat a little cheese. I wash my face and pits and everywhere else I can reach, then rinse my mouth with a little peppermint oil and scrape my tongue.

Finally, I put on the new heavier, warmer clothes and rebraid my hair simply, into two tight plaits. I replace my velvet gloves with woolen ones—checking to make sure the stuffing at the tip of my finger looks convincing.

By the time I am done, Oriana has returned. She has brought with her several soldiers carrying a pallet of furs and blankets, which she has them arrange into a bed for me, curtained with a screen.

“I think this will do for now,” she says, looking at me for confirmation.

I swallow the urge to thank her. “Better than I could have asked.”

As the soldiers depart, I follow them through the tent flap. Outside, I orient myself by the sun as it is about to set and look over the sea of tents again. I am able to pick out factions. Madoc’s people, flying his sigil, the crescent moon turned like a bowl. Those from the Court of Teeth have their tents marked with a device that seems to suggest an ominous mountain range. And two or three other Courts, either smaller ones or ones that sent fewer soldiers. *A whole host of other traitors*, Grima Mog said.

I can’t help but think like the spy I was, cannot help but see that I am perfectly positioned to discover Madoc’s plan. I am in his camp, in his very tent. I could uncover everything.

But that’s absolute madness. How long before Oriana or Madoc realizes that I am Jude and not Taryn? I remember the vow Madoc made to me: *And when I best you, I will make sure I do it as thoroughly as I would any opponent who has shown themselves to be my equal*. It was a backhanded compliment, but it was also a straightforward threat. I know exactly what Madoc does to his enemies—he kills them and then washes his cap in their blood.

And what does it matter? I am in exile, pushed out.

But if I had Madoc's plans, I could trade them for the end of my exile. Surely Cardan would agree to that, if I gave him the means to save Elfhame. Unless, of course, he thought I was lying.

Vivi would say I ought to stop worrying about kings and wars and worry instead about getting home. After my fight with Grima Mog, I could demand better jobs from Bryern. Vivi is right that if we gave up the pretense of living like other humans, we could have a much bigger place. And given the results of the inquest, Taryn probably can't return to Faerie.

At least until Madoc takes over.

Maybe I should just let it happen.

But that brings me to the thing I cannot get past. Even though it's ridiculous, I can't stop the anger that rises in me, lighting a fire in my heart.

I am the *Queen of Elfhame*.

Even though I am the queen in exile, I am still the queen.

And that means Madoc isn't just trying to take Cardan's throne. He's trying to take mine.

CHAPTER 9

We dine in the tent of the Court of Teeth, which is easily three times the size of Madoc's and decorated as elaborately as any palace. The floor is covered in rugs and furs. Lamps hang from the ceilings, and fat pillar candles burn atop tables beside decanters of some pale libation and bowls of frost-covered white berries of a type I have never seen before. A harpist plays in a corner, the strains of her music carrying through the buzz of conversation.

At the center of the tent rests three thrones—two large and one small. They seem to be sculptures of ice, with flowers and leaves frozen inside them. The large thrones are unoccupied, but a blue-skinned girl sits on the small one, a crown of icicles on her head and a golden bridle around her mouth and throat. She looks to be only a year or two older than Oak and is dressed in a column of gray silk. Her gaze is on her fingers, which move restlessly against one another. Her nails are bitten short and crusted with a thin rime of blood.

If she is the princess, then it is not hard to pick out the king and queen. They wear even more elaborate icicle crowns. Their skin is gray, the color of stone or corpses. Their eyes are a bright and clear yellow, like wine. And their garments are the blue of her skin. A matching trio.

"This is Lady Nore and Lord Jarel and their daughter, Queen Suren," Oriana says to me quietly. So the little girl is the ruler?

Unfortunately, Lady Nore notices my staring. “A mortal,” she says with a familiar contempt. “Whatever for?”

Madoc shoots an apologetic look in my direction. “Allow me to present one of my foster daughters, Taryn. I am sure I mentioned her.”

“Perhaps,” says Lord Jarel, joining us. His gaze is intense, the way an owl looks at a misguided mouse climbing directly into its nest.

I give my best curtsy. “I am glad to have a place at your hearth tonight.”

He turns his cold gaze on Madoc. “Diverting. It speaks as though it thinks it’s one of us.”

I forgot how it felt, all those years of being utterly powerless. Having Madoc alone for protection. And now that protection depends on his not guessing which of his daughters stands beside him. I look up at Lord Jarel with fear in my eyes, fear I don’t have to fake. And I hate how obviously it pleases him.

I think of the Bomb’s words about what the Court of Teeth did to her and to the Roach: *The Court carved us up and filled us full of curses and geases. Changed us. Forced us to serve them.*

I remind myself I am no longer the girl I was before. I might be surrounded, but that doesn’t mean I’m powerless. I vow that one day it is Lord Jarel who will be afraid.

But for now, I edge myself toward a corner, where I sit on a hide-covered tuffet and survey the room. I recall the Living Council warning that Courts were evading swearing fealty by hiding their children as changelings in the mortal world, then elevating them to rulers. I wonder if that’s what’s happened here. If so, it must gall Lord Jarel and Lady Nore to give up their titles. And make them nervous enough to bridle her.

Interesting to see their ostentation on display—their crowns and thrones and luxurious tent—as they support Madoc’s bid to elevate himself to High King, which would put him far above them. I don’t buy it. They might back him now, but I bet they hope to eliminate him later.

It is then that Grimsen enters the tent, wearing a scarlet cloak with an enormous pin in the shape of a metal-and-blown-glass heart that seems to beat. Lady Nore and Lord Jarel turn their attention to him, their stiff faces moving to chilly smiles.

I look over at Madoc. He appears less pleased to see the smith.

After a few more pleasantries, Lady Nore and Lord Jarel usher us to the table. Lady Nore leads Queen Suren by her bridle. As the child queen is led to the table, I notice that the straps sit oddly against her skin, as though they have

partially sunken into it. Something in the shimmer of the leather makes me think of enchantment.

I wonder if this horrible thing is Grimsen's work.

Seeing her bound, I can't help but think about Oak. I glance at Oriana, wondering if she's reminded of him, too, but her expression is as calm and remote as the surface of a frozen lake.

We go to the table. I am seated beside Oriana, across the table from Grimsen. He spots the sun-and-moon earrings I am still wearing and gestures at them.

"I wasn't sure your sister would give those up," he says.

I lean in and touch my gloved fingers to my earlobes. "Your work is exquisite," I tell him, knowing how fond he is of flattery.

He gives me an admiring look that I suspect is pride in his own art. If he finds me pretty, it's a compliment to his craft.

But it's also to my advantage to keep him talking. No one else here is likely to tell me much. I try to imagine what Taryn might say, but all I can come up with is more of what I think Grimsen wants to hear. I drop my voice to a whisper. "I can hardly bear to take them off, even at night."

He preens. "Mere trinkets."

"You must think I am very silly," I say. "I know you have made far greater things, but these have made me very happy."

Oriana gives me an odd look. Did I make a mistake? Does she suspect me? My heart speeds.

"You ought to visit my forge," Grimsen says. "Allow me to show you what truly potent magic looks like."

"I should like that very much," I manage, but I am distracted with worry over being caught and frustrated by the smith's invitation. If only he'd been willing to brag *here*, tonight, instead of setting up some assignation! I don't want to go to his forge. I want to get out of this camp. It is only a matter of time before I'm caught. If I am to learn anything, I need to do it quickly.

My frustration mounts as further conversation is cut off by the arrival of servants bringing dinner, which turns out to be a massive cut of roasted bear meat, served with cloudberries. One of the soldiers draws Grimsen into a discussion about his brooch. Beside me, Oriana is speaking of a poem I don't know to a courtier from the Court of Teeth. Left to myself, I concentrate on picking out the voices of Madoc and Lady Nore. They are debating which Courts can be brought over to their side.

"Have you spoken with the Court of Termites?"

Madoc nods. “Lord Roiben is wroth with the Undersea, and he cannot like that the High King denied him his revenge.”

My fingers clench on my knife. I made a deal with Roiben. I killed Balekin to honor it. That was Cardan’s excuse for *exiling* me. It is a bitter draught to consider that after all that, Lord Roiben might prefer to join with Madoc.

But whatever Lord Roiben wants, he still swore an oath of loyalty to the Blood Crown. And while some Courts—like the Court of Teeth—may have schemed their way free of their ancestors’ promises, most are still bound by them. Including Roiben. So how does Madoc think he is going to dissolve those bonds? Without some means of doing that, it doesn’t matter whom the low Courts prefer. They must follow the only ruler with the Blood Crown on his head: High King Cardan.

But since Taryn would say none of that, I bite my tongue as the conversations swirl around me. Later, back at our tent, I carry pitchers of honey wine and refill the cups of Madoc’s generals. I am not particularly memorable—merely Madoc’s human daughter, someone most of them have met in passing and thought little upon. Oriana gives me no more odd looks. If she thought my behavior with Grimsen was strange, I don’t think I have given her further reason to doubt me.

I feel the gravitational pull of my old role, the ease of it, ready to enfold me like a heavy blanket.

Tonight it seems impossible that I was ever anyone other than this dutiful child.

When I go to sleep, it is with a bitterness in my throat, one I haven’t felt in a long time, one that comes from not being able to affect the things that matter, even though they are happening right in front of me.

I wake on the cot, loaded with blankets and furs. I drink strong tea near the fire, walking around to loosen my limbs. To my relief, Madoc has already gone.

Today, I tell myself, *today I must find a way out of here*.

I’d noticed horses when we made our way through the camp. I could probably steal one. But I am an indifferent rider, and without a map, I could quickly become lost. Those are probably kept all together in a war tent. Perhaps I could invent a reason to visit my father.

“Do you think Madoc would like some tea?” I ask Oriana hopefully.

“If so, he can send a servant to prepare it,” she tells me kindly. “But there are many useful tasks to occupy your time. We Court ladies gather and stitch banners, if you’re feeling up to it.”

Nothing will give away my identity faster than my needlecraft. To call it poor is flattery.

“I don’t think I’m ready to answer questions about Locke,” I warn.

She nods sympathetically. Gossip passes the time at such gatherings, and it’s not unreasonable to think a dead husband would provoke talk.

“You may take a little basket and go foraging,” she suggests. “Just be careful to stay to the woods and away from the camp. If you see sentries, show them Madoc’s sigil.”

I try to contain my eagerness. “I can do that.”

As I draw on a borrowed cloak, she puts a hand on my arm.

“I heard you speaking with Grimsen last night,” Oriana says. “You must be careful of him.” I recall her many cautions over the years at revels. She made us promise not to dance, not to eat anything, not to *do anything* that could result in embarrassment for Madoc. It’s not that she doesn’t have her reasons, either. Before she was Madoc’s wife, she was High King Eldred’s lover and saw another of his lovers—and her dear friend—poisoned. But it’s still annoying.

“I will. I’ll be careful,” I say.

Oriana looks into my eyes. “Grimsen wants many things. If you are too kind, he may decide he wants you, too. He could desire you for your loveliness as one covets a rare jewel. Or he could desire you just to see if Madoc would give you up.”

“I understand,” I say, trying to seem like someone she doesn’t need to worry over.

She lets go of me with a wan smile, seeming to believe we understand each other.

Outside, I head toward the woods with my little basket. Once I hit the tree line, I stop, overwhelmed with the relief of no longer playing a role. For a moment, here, I can relax. I take some steadying breaths and consider my options. Again and again, I come back to Grimsen. Despite Oriana’s warning, he’s my best bet to find a way out of here. With all his magic trinkets, maybe he’s got a pair of metal wings to fly me home or a magical sled pulled by obsidian lions. Even if not, at least he doesn’t know Taryn well enough to doubt that I’m her.

And if he wants something that I don’t want to give him, well, he has a bad habit of leaving knives just lying about.

I hike through the woods to higher ground. From there, I can see the camp and all its pavilions. I spot the makeshift forge, set back from everything else, smoke

rising in great quantities from its three chimneys. I spot an area of the camp where a large, round tent is a hub of activity. Maybe that's where Madoc is and where the maps are.

And I spot something else. When I first took stock of the camp, I noticed a small outpost at the base of the mountain, far from the other tents. But from here I can see there's also a cave. Two guards stand as sentries by the entrance.

Odd, that. It seems inconveniently far from everything else. But depending on what's in there, maybe that's the point. It's far enough to muffle even the loudest of screams.

With a shudder, I head down toward the forge.

I get a few looks from goblins and grigs and sharp-toothed members of the Folk with powdery wings as I cut through the outer edge of the camp. I hear a little hiss as I pass, and one of the ogres licks his lips in what is not at all a come-on. No one stops me, though.

The door to Grimsen's forge is propped open, and I see the smith inside, shirtless, his wiry, hairy form bent over the blade he's hammering. The forge is scorchingly hot, the air thick with heat, stinking of creosote. Around him are an array of weapons and trinkets that are far more than what they seem: little metal boats, brooches, silver heels for boots, a key that looks as though it was carved from crystal.

I think of the offer Grimsen wanted me to convey to Cardan before he decided greater glory lay in betrayal: *I will make him armor of ice to shatter every blade that strikes it and that will make his heart too cold to feel pity. Tell him I will make him three swords that, when used in the same battle, will fight with the might of thirty soldiers.*

I hate to think of all that in Madoc's hands.

Steeling myself, I knock on the doorframe.

Grimsen spots me and puts down his hammer. "The girl with the earrings," he says.

"You invited me to come," I remind him. "I hope this isn't too soon, but I was so curious. Can I ask what you're making, or is it a secret?"

That seems to please him. He indicates with a smile the enormous bar of metal he's working on. "I am crafting a sword to crack the firmament of the isles. What do you think of that, mortal girl?"

On one hand, Grimsen has forged some of the greatest weapons ever made. But can Madoc's plan truly be to cut through the armies of Elfhame? I think of Cardan, causing the sea to boil, storms to come, and trees to wither. Cardan, who

has the sworn loyalty of dozens of low Court rulers and the command of all their armies. Can any one sword be great enough to stand against that, even if it is the greatest blade Grimsen has ever forged?

"Madoc must be grateful to have you on his side," I say neutrally. "And to have such a weapon promised to him."

"Hmph," he says, fixing me with a beady eye. "He ought to be, but *is* he? You'd have to ask him yourself, since he makes no mention of gratitude. And if they *happen* to make songs about me, well, is he interested in hearing them? No. No time for songs, he says. I wonder if he'd feel differently if there were songs about him."

Apparently, it wasn't encouraging his bragging that got him to talk, but stoking his resentment.

"If he becomes the next High King, there will be plenty of songs about him," I say, pressing the point.

A cloud passes over Grimsen's face, his mouth moving into a slight expression of disgust.

"But you, who has been a master smith through Mab's reign and all those who followed, your story must be more interesting than his—better fodder for ballads." I fear I am laying it on too thick, but he brightens.

"Ah, Mab," he says, reminiscing. "When she came to me to forge the Blood Crown, she entrusted me with a great honor. And I cursed it to protect it for all time."

I smile encouragingly. I know this part. "The murder of the wearer causes death for the person responsible."

He snorts. "I want my *work* to endure just as Queen Mab wanted her *line* to endure. But I care for even the least of my creations." He reaches out to touch the earrings with his sooty fingers. He brushes the lobe of my ear, his skin warm and rough. I duck out of his grasp with what I hope is a demure laugh and not a snarl.

"Take these, for example," he says. "Prize out the gems, and your beauty would fade—not just the extra smidge they grant, but all your beauty, until you were so wretched that the sight of you would set even the Folk to screaming."

I try to control the urge to rip the earrings from my ears. "You cursed them, too?"

His grin is sly. "Not everyone is properly respectful of a craftsman the way you are, Taryn, daughter of Madoc. Not everyone deserves my gifts."

I ponder that for a long moment, wondering at the array of creations that have come from his forge. Wondering how many of them were cursed.

"Is that why you were exiled?" I ask.

"The High Queen disliked my taking quite so much artistic license, so I was not much in favor when I followed the Alderking into exile," he says, and I figure that means yes, pretty much. "She liked to be the clever one."

I nod, as though there is nothing at all alarming about that story. My mind is racing, trying to recall all the things he's made. "Didn't you gift an earring to Cardan when you first came to Elfhame?"

"You have a good memory," he says. Hopefully, I have a better memory than he does, because Taryn didn't attend the Blood Moon revel. "It allowed him to overhear those speaking just outside of range. A wonderful device for eavesdropping."

I wait expectantly.

He laughs. "That's not what you want to know, is it? Yes, it was cursed. With a word, I could turn it into a ruby spider that would bite him until he died."

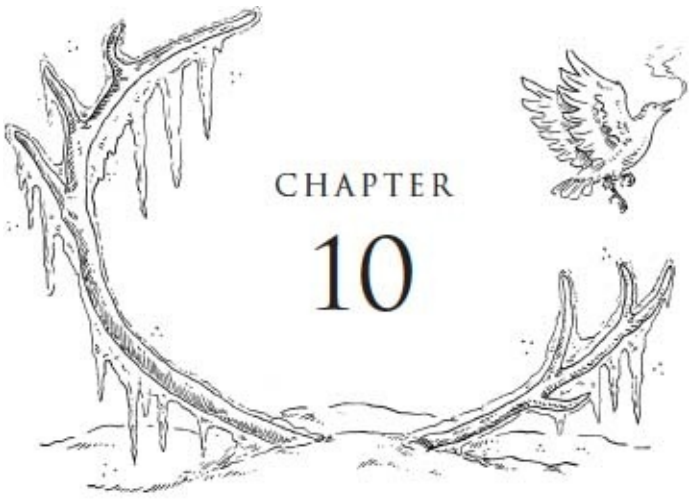
"Did you use it?" I ask, recalling the globe I saw in Cardan's study, in which a glittering red spider scrabbled restlessly at the glass. I am filled with cold horror at a tragedy already averted—and then blinding anger.

Grimsen shrugs. "He's still alive, isn't he?"

A very faerie answer. It sounds like *no,* when the truth is that the smith *tried* and *it didn't work*.

I ought to press him for more, ought to ask him about a way for me to escape the camp, but I can't bear to speak with him for another minute and not stab him with one of his own weapons. "Can I visit again?" I grit out, the false smile I am wearing feeling a lot more like a grimace.

I don't like the look he gives me, as though I am a gemstone he wishes to set into metal. "I would like that," he says, sweeping his hand around the forge, at all the objects there. "As you can see, I like beautiful things."



CHAPTER 10

After my visit to Grimsen, I tromp back into the woods to do the promised foraging with satisfying aggressiveness, collecting rowan berries, wood sorrel, nettles, a bit of deathsweet, and enormous cep mushrooms. I kick a rock, sending it skittering deeper into the woods. Then I kick another. It takes a lot of rocks before I feel even a little bit better.

I am no closer to finding a way to get out of here and no clearer on my father's plans. The only thing I am closer to is getting caught.

With that grim thought in mind, I discover Madoc sitting by the fire outside the tent, cleaning and sharpening the set of daggers he keeps on his person. Habit urges me to help him with the job, and I have to remind myself that Taryn wouldn't do that.

"Come sit," he urges, patting a bare side of a log on which he's perched. "You aren't used to campaigning, and you've been thrust into the thick of it."

Does he suspect me? I sit, resting my overfull basket near the fire, and reassure myself that he wouldn't sound nearly as friendly if he thought he was talking to Jude. I know I don't have long, though, so I chance it and ask him what I want to ask. "Do you really think you can defeat him?"

He laughs as though it's the question of a small child. *If you could reach your hand up far enough, could you pluck the moon from the sky?* "I wouldn't play the game if I couldn't win."

I feel oddly emboldened by his laughter. He really believes that I'm Taryn and that I know nothing of war. "But *how*?"

"I will spare you the whole of the strategy," he says. "But I am going to challenge him to a duel—and after I win, I will split his melon of a head."

"A duel?" I am flummoxed. "Why would *he* fight *you*?" Cardan is the High King. He has armies to stand between them.

Madoc grins. "For love," he says. "And for duty."

"Love of whom?" I can't believe that Taryn would be any less confused than I am right now.

"There is no banquet too abundant for a starving man," he says.

I don't know what to say to that. After a moment, he takes pity on me. "I know you don't care for lessons on tactics, but I think this one will appeal even to you. For what we want most, we will take almost any chance. There is a prophecy that he would make a poor king. It hangs over his head, but he believes he can charm his way free of fate. Let's see him try. I am going to give him a chance to prove he's a good ruler."

"And then?" I prompt.

But he only laughs again. "Then the Folk will call you Princess Taryn."

All my life I have heard of the great conquests of Faerie. As one might expect of an immortal people with few births, most battles are highly formalized, as are lines of succession. The Folk like to avoid all-out war, which means it's not unusual to settle an issue with some mutually agreed-upon contest. Still, Cardan never cared much for sword fighting and isn't particularly good at it. Why would he agree to a duel?

If I ask that, though, I am terrified Madoc will know me. Yet I must say *something*. I can't just sit here staring at him with my mouth hanging open.

"Jude got control of Cardan somehow," I pose. "Maybe you could do the same and—"

He shakes his head. "Look what became of your sister. Whatever power she had, he took back from her. No, I don't intend to continue even the pretense of serving any longer. Now I would rule." He stops sharpening his dagger and looks over at me with a dangerous gleam in his eye. "I gave Jude chance after chance to be a help to the family. Every opportunity to tell me the game she was playing. Had she done so, things would have come out very different."

A shiver goes through me. Does he guess I am sitting beside him?

"Jude is pretty sad," I say in what I hope is a neutral way. "At least according to Vivi."

“And you do not wish me to punish her further when I am High King, is that it?” he asks. “It’s not as though I am not proud. What she achieved was no small thing. She’s perhaps the most like me of all my children. And like children the world over, she was rebellious, and her grasp exceeded her reach. But *you* …”

“Me?” My gaze goes to the fire. It’s jarring to hear him talk about me, but the idea of hearing something meant for Taryn alone is worse. I feel as though I am taking something from her. I can think of no way to stop it, though, no way that doesn’t involve giving myself away.

He reaches over to grip my shoulder. It would be reassuring, except that the pressure is a little too hard, his claws a little too sharp. This is the moment he’s going to grab me by the throat and tell me I am caught. My heart speeds.

“You must have felt as though I favored her, despite her ingratitude,” he says. “But it was only that I understood her better. And yet, you and I have something in common—we both made a poor marriage.”

I give him a sideways look, relief and incredulity warring with each other. Is he really saying his marriage to our mother was like Taryn’s marriage to Locke?

He draws away from me to add another log to the fire. “And both ended tragically.”

I suck in a breath. “You don’t really think …” But I don’t know what lie to give. I don’t even know if Taryn would lie.

“No?” Madoc asks. “Who killed Locke, if not you?”

For too long, I can’t think of any good answer.

He barks out a laugh and points a clawed finger at me, absolutely delighted. “It *was* you! Truly, Taryn, I always thought you were soft and meek, but I see now how wrong I have been.”

“Are you *glad* I killed him?” He seems prouder of Taryn for murdering Locke than for all her other graces and skills combined—her ability to put people at ease, to choose just the right garment, and to tell just the right kind of lie to make people love her.

He shrugs, still smiling. “Alive or dead, I never cared about him. I only cared for you. If you’re sorrowful that he’s gone, then I am sorry for that. If you wish he were returned to life so you could kill him again, I recognize that feeling. But perhaps you dispensed justice and are only troubled that justice can be cruel.”

“What do you think he did to me to deserve to die?” I ask.

He stokes the fire. Sparks fly up. “I assumed he broke your heart. An eye for an eye, a heart for a heart.”

I remember what it was like to have a knife pressed to Cardan's throat. To panic at the thought of the power he had over me, to realize there was an easy way to end it. "Is that why you killed Mom?"

He sighs. "I honed my instincts in battle," he says. "Sometimes those instincts are still there when there is no more war."

I consider that, wondering what it takes to harden yourself to fight and kill over and over again. Wondering if some part of him is cold inside, a kind of cold that can never be warmed, like a shard of ice through the heart. Wondering if I have a shard like that, too.

For a moment, we sit quietly together, listening to the crackle and pop of the flames. Then he speaks again. "When I murdered your mother—your mother *and* your father—I changed you. Their deaths were a crucible, the fire in which all three of you girls were forged. Plunge a heated sword into oil, and any small flaw will turn into a crack. But quenched in blood as you were, none of you broke. You were only hardened. Perhaps what led you to end Locke's life is more my fault than yours. If it's hard for you to bear what you did, give me the weight."

I think of Taryn's words: *No one should have the childhood we had.*

And yet I find myself wanting to reassure Madoc, even if I can never forgive him. What would Taryn say? I don't know, but it would be unfair to comfort him with her voice.

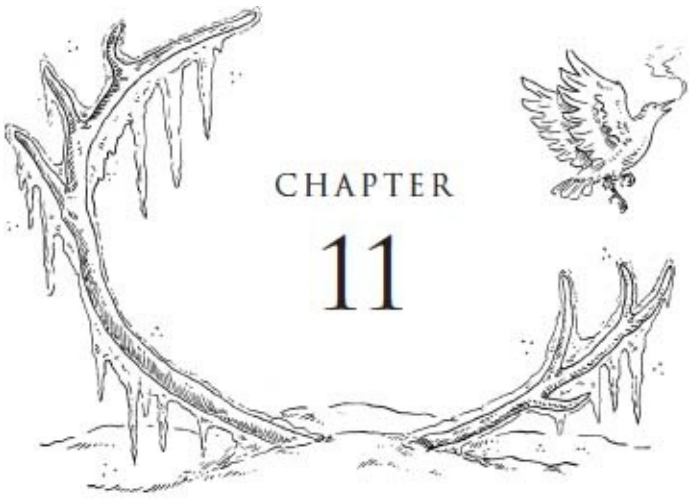
"I should take this to Oriana," I say, indicating the basket of foraged food. I rise, but he catches my hand.

"Do not think I will forget your loyalty." He looks up at me meditatively. "You put our family's interests above your own. When all this is over, you can name your reward, and I will make sure you get it."

I feel a pang that I am no longer the daughter to whom he makes offers like this. I am not the one welcomed to his hearth, not the one he would care for and cherish.

I wonder what Taryn would ask for herself and the baby in her belly. Safety, I'd wager, the one thing Madoc believes he has already given us, the one thing he can never truly provide. No matter what promises he would make, he is too ruthless to ever keep anyone safe for long.

As for me, safety is not even on offer. He hasn't caught me yet, but my ability to sustain this masquerade is wearing thin. Although I am not sure how I will manage the trek across the ice, I resolve that I must run tonight.



CHAPTER 11

Oriana oversees the preparation of dinner for the company, and I stay by her side. I observe the making of nettle soup, stewed with potatoes until the sting is removed, and the butchering of deer, their freshly shot bodies steaming in the cold, their fat used to flavor tender greens. Each of the company has their own bowl and cup, clanking on their belts like ornamentation, and these are presented to the servers and filled with a ration of food and watered wine.

Madoc eats with his generals, laughing and talking. The Court of Teeth keep to their tents, sending a servant out to prepare their meal over a different fire. Grimsen sits apart from the generals, at a table of knights who listen with rapt attention to his stories of exile with the Alderking. It is impossible not to notice that the Folk who surround him wear perhaps more ornament than is typical.

The area where the cookpots and tables are is on the far side of the camp, closer to the mountain. In the distance, I see two guards standing sentry near the cave, not leaving their shift to eat with us. Near them, two reindeer nuzzle the snow, looking for buried roots.

I chew my nettle soup, an idea forming in my mind. By the time Oriana urges me back to our tent, I have come to a decision. I will steal one of the mounts from the soldiers near the cave. It will be easier to do that than take one from the main camp, and if something goes wrong, I will be more difficult to pursue. I

still don’t have a map, but I can navigate by the stars well enough to go south, at least. Hopefully, I will find a mortal settlement.

We share a cup of tea and shake off the snow. I warm my stiff fingers on the cup impatiently. I don’t want to make her suspicious, but I need to get moving. I’ve got to pack up food and any other supplies I can manage.

“You must be quite cold,” says Oriana, studying me. With her white hair and ghostly pale skin, she looks to be made of snow herself.

“Mortal weakness.” I smile. “Another reason to miss the isles of Elfhame.”

“We’ll be home soon,” she assures me. She cannot lie, so she must believe that. She must believe that Madoc will win, that he will be made High King.

Finally, she seems ready to retire. I wash my face, then stuff matches in one pocket and a knife in another. After I get into bed, I wait until I figure Oriana is probably asleep, counting off the seconds until a half hour has passed. Then I slip out from the coverlets as quietly as I can and shove my feet into boots. I dump some cheese into a bag, along with a heel of bread and three withered apples. I take the deathsweet I found while foraging and wrap it up in a little paper. Then I pad to the exit of the tent, taking up my cloak along the way. There is a single knight there, amusing himself by carving a flute before the fire. I nod to him as I pass.

“My lady?” he says, rising.

I turn my most withering glare on him. I am no prisoner, after all. I am the daughter of the Grand General. “Yes?”

“Where should I tell your father he can find you, should he ask?” The question is phrased in a deferential manner, but no doubt answering it wrong could lead him to less deferential questions.

“Tell him that I am busy using the woods for a chamber pot,” I say, and he flinches, as I hoped he would. He asks me no more questions as I settle the cloak over my shoulders and head out, aware that the more time I take, the more suspicious he will become.

The walk to the cave is not overlong, but I stumble frequently in the dark, the cold wind more cutting with every step. Music and revelry rise from the camp, goblin songs about loss and longing and violence. Ballads of queens and knights and fools.

Close to the cave, I see three guards standing at attention around the wide opening—one more than I had hoped. The cave entrance is long and wide, like a smile, and the darkness beyond flickers occasionally, as though it’s lit from

somewhere deep within. Two pale reindeer doze nearby, curled in the snow like cats. A third scratches its antlers against a nearby tree.

That one, then. I can sneak deeper into the trees and lure him with one of the apples. As I begin to head into the woods, I hear a cry from the cave. The dense, cold air carries the sound to me, making me turn back.

Madoc has someone imprisoned.

I try to convince myself this isn't my problem, but another sound of distress cuts through all those clever thoughts. Someone is in there, in pain. I've got to make sure it isn't someone I know. My muscles are already stiff with cold, so I go slowly, circling the cave and climbing the rocks directly above it.

My impromptu plan is to drop down into the cave entrance since the guards are mostly looking in the other direction. It has the advantage of hiding me on my way to the drop, but then the actual dropping needs to be done really, really well or the combination of sound and motion is going to alert them immediately.

I grit my teeth and remember the Ghost's lessons—go slowly, make every step sure, keep to the shadows. Of course, that comes with the memory of the betrayal that followed, but I tell myself that doesn't make the lessons any less useful. I lower myself slowly from a jagged bit of a boulder. Even in gloves, my fingers feel frozen.

Then, hanging there, I realize I have made a terrible miscalculation. Even fully extended, my body cannot reach the ground. When I drop, there's no way to avoid making some sound. I am just going to have to be as quiet as I can and move as swiftly as I am able. I take a breath and let myself fall the short distance. At the inevitable crunch of my feet in the snow, one of the guards turns. I slip into the shadows.

"What is it?" asks one of the other two guards.

The first is staring into the cave. I can't tell if he spotted me or not.

I keep myself as still as possible, holding my breath, hoping he didn't see me, hoping that he can't *smell* me. At least, cold as it is, I'm not sweating.

My knife is near to hand. I remind myself that I fought Grima Mog. If it comes to it, I can fight them, too.

But after a moment, the guard shakes his head and goes back to listening to goblin songs. I wait and then wait some more, just to be sure. It gives my eyes time to adjust. There is a mineral scent in the air, along with that of burning lamp oil. Shadows dance at the end of a slanted passageway, tempting me on with the promise of light.

I make my way along between stalagmites and stalactites, as though I am stepping through the jagged teeth of a giant. I step into a new chamber and have to blink against the glow of torchlight.

"Jude?" says a soft voice. A voice I know. The Ghost.

Thin, with bruises blooming along his collarbones, he rests on the floor of the cave, his wrists manacled and chained to plates in the ground. Torches blaze in a circle surrounding him. He looks up at me with wide hazel eyes.

Cold as I am, I suddenly feel colder. The last thing he said to me was *I served Prince Dain. Not you*. That was right before I got dragged off to the Undersea and held there for weeks, terrified, starved, and alone. And yet, despite that, despite his betrayal, despite destroying the Court of Shadows, he speaks my name with all the wonder of someone who thinks I might be coming to save him.

I consider pretending to be Taryn, but he could hardly believe it was my twin who snuck past those guards. After all, he's the one who taught me to move like that. "I wanted to see what Madoc was hiding out here," I say, drawing out my knife. "And if you're thinking of calling the guards, know that the only reason I have for not stabbing you in the throat is the fear that you might die loudly."

The Ghost gives me a small, wry smile. "I would, you know. Very loudly. Just to spite you."

"So here are the wages for your service," I say with a pointed look around the cave. "I hope betrayal was its own reward."

"Gloat all you like." His voice is mild. "I deserve it. I know what I did, Jude. I was a fool."

"Then why did you do it?" It makes me feel uncomfortably vulnerable even to ask. But I'd trusted the Ghost, and I wanted to know how stupid I'd been. Had he hated me the whole time I'd considered us friends? Had he and Cardan laughed together at my trusting nature?

"Do you remember when I told you that I killed Oak's mother?"

I nod. Liriope had been poisoned with blusher mushroom to hide that while she was the lover of the High King, she was pregnant with Prince Dain's child. If Oriana hadn't cut Oak from Liriope's womb, the baby would have died, too. It's an awful story, and one I wouldn't be likely to forget, even if it didn't concern my brother.

"Do you remember how you looked at me when you discovered what I'd done?" he asks.

It had been a day or two after the coronation. I had taken Prince Cardan prisoner. I was still in shock. I was trying to piece together Madoc's plot. I'd

been horrified to learn that the Ghost did such a horrendous thing, but I was horrified a lot then. Still, blusher mushroom is a nightmarish way to die, and my brother was almost murdered, too. “I was surprised.”

He shakes his head. “Even the Roach was appalled. He never knew.”

“And that’s why you betrayed us? You thought we were too judgmental?” I ask, incredulous.

“No. Just listen one moment more.” The Ghost sighs. “I killed Liriope because Prince Dain brought me to Faerie, provided for me, and gave me purpose. Because I was loyal, I did it, but afterward, I was shaken by what I had done. In despair, I went to the boy I thought was Liriope’s only living child.”

“Locke,” I say numbly. I wonder if Locke realized, after Cardan’s coronation, that Oak must be his half brother. I wonder if he felt anything about it, if he ever mentioned it to Taryn.

“Stricken with guilt,” the Ghost goes on, “I offered him my protection. And my name.”

“Your—” I begin, but he cuts me off.

“My *true name*,” says the Ghost.

Among the Folk, true names are closely guarded secrets. A faerie can be controlled by their true name, surer than by any vow. It’s hard to believe the Ghost would give so much of himself away.

“What did he make you do?” I ask, cutting to the chase.

“For many years, nothing,” the Ghost said. “Then little things. Spying on people. Ferreting out their secrets. But until he ordered that I take you to the Tower of Forgetting and let the Undersea abduct you, I believed he meant mischief, never danger.”

Nicasia must have known to ask him for a favor. No wonder Locke and his friends felt safe enough to hunt me the night before his wedding. He knew I would be gone the next day.

And yet, I still understand what the Ghost means. I thought Locke always meant mischief, too, even when it seemed possible I would die of it.

I shake my head. “But that doesn’t explain how you came to be here.”

The Ghost looks as though he is struggling to keep his voice even, to keep his temper in check. “After the Tower, I tried to put enough distance between myself and Locke that he wouldn’t be able to order me to do anything again. Knights caught me leaving Insmire. That’s when I found out the scope of what Locke had done. He gave my name to your father. It was his dowry for your twin sister’s hand and a seat at the table when Balekin came to power.”

I suck in my breath. "*Madoc* knows your *true name*?"

"Bad, right?" He gives a hollow laugh. "Your stumbling in here is the first good fortune I've had in a long time. And it is good fortune, even if we both know what needs to happen next."

I remember how carefully I gave Cardan commands, ones that meant he couldn't avoid or escape me. Madoc has doubtless done that and more, so that the Ghost believes only one path is open to him.

"I'm going to get you out of here," I say. "And then—"

The Ghost cuts me off. "I can show you where to cause me the least pain. I can show you how to make it seem like I did it myself."

"You said that you'd die loudly, just to spite me," I repeat, pretending he's not serious.

"I would have, too," he says with a little smile. "I needed to tell you—I needed to tell *someone* the truth before I died. Now that's done. Let me teach you one last lesson."

"Wait," I say, holding up a hand. I need to stall him. I need to think.

He goes on relentlessly. "It is no life to be always under someone's control, subject to their will and whim. I know the geas you asked for from Prince Dain. I know you were willing to murder to receive it. No glamour touches you. Remember when it was otherwise? Remember what it felt like to be powerless?"

Of course I do. And I can't help thinking of the mortal servant in Balekin's household, Sophie, with her pockets full of stones. Sophie, lost to the Undersea. A shudder goes through me before I can shrug it off.

"Stop being dramatic." I draw out the bag of food I had with me and sit down in the dirt to cut up wedges of cheese, apples, and bread. "We're not out of options yet. You look half-starved, and I need you alive. You could enchant a ragwort stalk and get us out of here—and you owe me that much help, at least."

He grabs pieces of cheese and apple and shoves them into his mouth. As he eats, I consider the chains holding him. Could I pry apart the links? I note a hole on the plate that seems just the size for a key.

"You're scheming," the Ghost says, noticing my gaze. "Grimsen made my restraints to resist all but the most magical of blades."

"I'm *always* scheming," I return. "How much of Madoc's plan do you know?"

"Very little. Knights bring me food and changes of clothing. I have been allowed to bathe only under a heavy guard. Once, Grimsen came to peer at me, but he was entirely silent, even when I shouted at him." It is not like the Ghost to shout. Or to scream the way he must have for me to have heard him, to scream

out of misery and despair and hopelessness. “Several times, Madoc has come to interrogate me about the Court of Shadows, about the palace, about Cardan and Lady Asha and Dain, even about you. I know he’s searching for weaknesses, for the means to manipulate everyone.”

The Ghost reaches for another slice of the apple and hesitates, looking at the food as though seeing it for the first time. “Why did you have any of this with you? Why bring a picnic to explore a cave?”

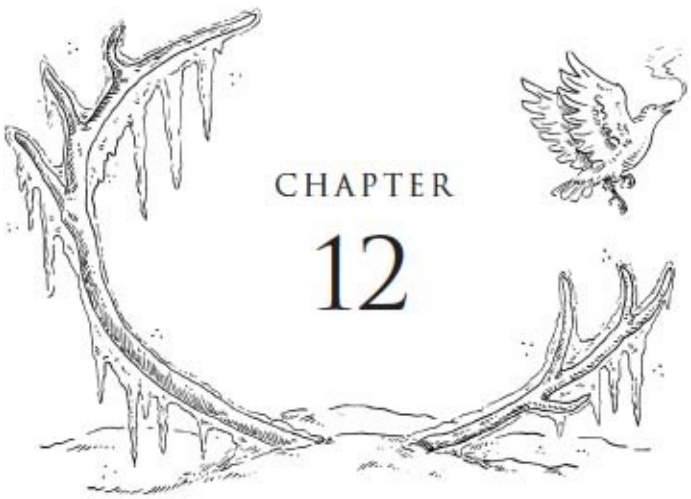
“I was planning on running away,” I admit. “Tonight. Before they discover I am not the sister I am pretending to be.”

He looks up at me in horror. “Then go, Jude. Run. You can’t stay for my sake.”

“I’m not—you’re going to help me get out of here,” I insist, cutting him off when he starts to argue. “I can manage for one more day. Tell me how to open your chains.”

Something in my face seems to convince him of my seriousness. “Grimsen has the key,” he says, not meeting my eyes. “But you’d be better served if you used the knife.”

The worst part is, he’s probably right.



When I get back to the tent, the guard isn't there. Feeling lucky, I slip under the flap, hoping to creep to my bed before Madoc gets home from whatever he's plotting with his generals.

What I do not expect is for the candles to be lit and Oriana to be sitting at the table, entirely awake. I freeze.

She stands, folding her arms. "Where were you?"

"Uh," I say, scrambling to figure out what she already knows—and what she'd believe. "There was a knight who asked me to meet him under the stars and—"

Oriana holds up her hand. "I covered for you. I dismissed the guard before he could carry tales. Do not insult me by lying anymore. You are not Taryn."

The cold horror of discovery settles over me. I want to run back out the way I came, but I think of the Ghost. If I run now, my chances of getting the key are pitiful. He will not be saved. And I will have very little chance of saving myself.

"Don't tell Madoc," I say, hoping against hope I can persuade her to be on my side in this. "Please. I never planned on coming here. Madoc rendered me unconscious and dragged me to this camp. I only pretended to be Taryn because I was already pretending to be her in Elfhame."

"How do I know you're not lying?" she demands, her unblinking pink eyes gazing at me warily. "How do I know you're not here to murder him?"

“There’s no way I could have known Madoc would come for Taryn,” I insist. “The only reason I’m still here is that I don’t know how to leave—I tried tonight, but I couldn’t. Help me get away,” I say. “Help me, and you will never have to see me again.”

She looks as though that’s an enormously compelling promise. “If you’re gone, he will guess I had a hand in it.”

I shake my head, scrambling for a plan. “Write to Vivi. She can get me. I’ll leave a note that I went to visit her and Oak. He never needs to know Taryn wasn’t here.”

Oriana turns away, pouring a deep green herbal liquor into tiny glasses. “Oak. I do not like how different he is becoming in the mortal world.”

I want to scream in frustration at her abrupt subject change, but I force myself to be calm. I imagine him stirring his brightly colored cereal. “I don’t always like it, either.”

She passes me a delicate cup. “If Madoc can make himself High King, then Oak can come home. He won’t be between Madoc and the crown. He will be safe.”

“Remember your warning about how it was dangerous to be near a king?” I wait until she sips before I do. It is bitter and grassy and explodes on my tongue with the flavors of rosemary and nettle and thyme. I wince but don’t dislike it.

She gives me an annoyed look. “You certainly have not behaved as though *you* recalled it.”

“Fair,” I admit. “And I paid the price.”

“I will keep your secret, Jude. And I will send Vivi a message. But I won’t work against Madoc, and you shouldn’t, either. I want you to promise.”

As the Queen of Elfhame, I am the one Madoc is against. It would give me such satisfaction for Oriana to know, when she thinks so little of me. It’s a petty thought, followed by the realization that if Madoc found out, I would be in a whole different kind of trouble than I have been in before. He would use me. As frightened as I have been, here by his side, I ought to have been even more afraid.

I look Oriana in the eyes and lie as sincerely as I have ever done. “I promise.”

“Good,” she says. “Now, why were you sneaking around Elfhame, masquerading as Taryn?”

“She asked me to,” I say, raising my brows and waiting for her to understand.

“Why would she—” Oriana begins, and then stops herself. When she speaks, it seems as though she is talking mostly to herself. “For the inquest. Ah.”

I take another sip of the herbal liquor.

"I worried about your sister, alone in that Court," Oriana says, her pale brows drawing together. "Her family reputation in tatters and Lady Asha back, no doubt seeing an opportunity to exert influence over the courtiers, now that her son was on the throne."

"Lady Asha?" I echo, surprised that Oriana would think of her as a threat to Taryn, specifically.

Oriana rises and gathers writing materials. When she sits again, she begins penning a note to Vivi. After a few lines, she looks up. "I never supposed she would return."

That's what happens when people get tossed into the Tower of Forgetting. They get forgotten. "She was a courtier around the time that you were, right?" That's the closest I can say to what I mean, that Oriana was also the High King's lover. And while she never gave him a child, she has reason to know *a lot* of gossip. Something led her to make the comment she did.

"Your mother was once a friend to Lady Asha, you know. Eva had a great appreciation for wickedness. I do not say that to hurt you, Jude. It is a trait worthy of neither scorn nor pride."

I knew your mother. That was the first thing Lady Asha ever said to me. *Knew so many of her little secrets.*

"I didn't realize *you* knew my mom," I say.

"Not well. And it's hardly my place to talk about her," Oriana says.

"Nor am I asking you to," I return, although I wish that I could.

Ink drips from the tip of Oriana's pen before she sets it down and seals up the letter to Vivienne. "Lady Asha was beautiful and eager for the High King's favor. Their dalliance was brief, and I am sure Eldred thought bedding her would come to nothing. He rather too obviously regretted that she bore him a child—but that may have had something to do with the prophecy."

"Prophecy?" I prompt. I have a memory of Madoc saying something similar regarding his fortune when he was trying to convince me that we should join forces.

She gives a minute shrug of her shoulders. "The youngest prince was born under an ill-favored star. But he was still a prince, and once Asha had him, her place in the Court was secure. She was a disruptive force. She craved admiration. She wanted experiences, sensations, triumphs, things that required conflict—and enemies. She would not have been kind to someone as friendless as your sister must have been."

I wonder if she was unkind to Oriana, once. “I understand she didn’t take very good care of Prince Cardan.” I am thinking of the crystal globe in Eldred’s rooms and the memory trapped inside.

“It wasn’t as though she didn’t dress him in velvets or furs; it’s that she left them on until they grew ragged. Nor was it that she didn’t feed him the most delectable cuts of meat and cake; but she forgot him for long enough that he had to scavenge for food in between. I don’t think she loved him, but then I don’t think she loved anyone. He was petted and fed wine and adored, then forgotten. But for all that, if he was bad with her, he was worse without her. They are cut from the same cloth.”

I shudder, imagining the loneliness of that life, the anger. That desire for love.

There is no banquet too abundant for a starving man.

“If you’re looking for reasons why he disappointed you,” Oriana says, “by all accounts, Prince Cardan was a disappointment from the beginning.”

That night, Oriana releases a snowy owl with a letter attached to its claws. As it flies up into the cold sky, I am hopeful.

And later, lying in bed, I scheme as I have not done since my exile. Tomorrow, I will steal the key from Grimsen, and when I leave, I will take the Ghost with me. With what I know about Madoc’s plans and allies and the location of his army, I will force a bargain with Cardan to rescind my exile and to end the inquest into Taryn. I’m not going to let myself get distracted by letters I never received or the way he looked at me when we were alone in his rooms or my father’s theories about his weaknesses.

Unfortunately, from the time I wake, Oriana will not let me leave her side. While she trusts me enough to keep my secret, she doesn’t trust me enough to let me walk around the camp, now that she knows who I truly am.

She gives me wet laundry to spread before the fire, beans to pick from stones, and blankets to fold. I try not to rush through the tasks. I try to appear annoyed only because there seems to be a lot of work for me, though there was never so much work when I was Taryn. I don’t want her to know how frustrated I am as the day wears on. My fingers itch to steal the key from Grimsen.

Finally, as evening sets in, I catch a break. “Take this to your father,” Oriana tells me, setting down a tray bearing a pot of nettle tea, a wrapped-up bundle of

biscuits, and a crock of jam to go with them. “In the generals’ tent. He asked for you specifically.”

I grab my cloak, hoping not to seem obviously eager, when the second half of what she said sinks in. A soldier is waiting for me outside the door, amping up my nerves. Oriana said she wouldn’t tell Madoc about me, but that doesn’t mean she couldn’t have given me away somehow. And it doesn’t mean that Madoc couldn’t have figured it out himself.

The generals’ tent is large and cluttered with all the maps I couldn’t find in his tent. It’s also filled with soldiers sitting on goat-hide camp stools, some armored and some not. When I come in, a few of them glance up, and then their gazes slide away from me as from a servant.

I set down the tray and pour a cup, forcing myself not to look too carefully at the map unfurled in front of them. It’s impossible not to notice that they’re moving little wooden boats across the sea, toward Elfhame.

“Pardon,” I say, setting the nettle tea in front of Madoc.

He gives me an indulgent smile. “Taryn,” he says. “Good. I have been thinking you ought to have your own tent. You’re a widow, not a child.”

“Tha—that’s very kind,” I say, surprised. It *is* kind, and yet I cannot help wondering if it’s like one of those chess moves that looks innocuous at first but turns out to be the one setting up checkmate.

As he sips his tea, he projects the satisfaction of someone who obviously has more important matters to take care of yet is pleased to have a chance to play the doting father. “I promised your loyalty would be rewarded.”

I cannot help seeing how everything he says and does could be double-edged.

“Come here,” Madoc calls to one of his knights. A goblin in shining golden armor makes an elegant bow. “Find my daughter a tent and supplies to outfit it. Anything she needs.” Then to me. “This is Alver. Do not be too great a torment to him.”

It is not custom to thank the Folk, but I kiss Madoc on his cheek. “You’re too good to me.”

He snorts, a small smile showing a sharp canine. I let my gaze flicker to the map—and the models of boats floating on the paper sea—one more time before I follow Alver out the door.

An hour later, I am setting up a spacious tent erected not far from Madoc’s. Oriana is suspicious when I arrive to move my things, but she allows it to be done. She even brings cheese and bread, placing them on the painted table that was found for me.

“I don’t see why you’re going to all this trouble to decorate,” she says when Alver has finally left. “You’ll be gone tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I echo.

“I received word from your sister. She will be here near dawn to pick you up. You’re to meet her just outside the camp. There’s an outcrop of rocks where Vivi can safely wait for you. And when you leave a note for your father, I expect it to be convincing.”

“I will do my best,” I say.

She presses her lips into a fine line. Maybe I should feel grateful to her, but I am too annoyed. If only she hadn’t wasted the better part of my day, my evening would go a lot easier.

I will have to deal with the Ghost’s guards. There will be no sneaking past them this time. “Will you give me some of your paper?” I ask, and when she agrees, I take a wineskin as well.

Alone in my new tent, I crush the deathsweet and add a little bit to the wine so it can infuse for at least an hour before I strain the vegetal bits. That should be strong enough to cause them to sleep for at least a day and a night but not kill them. I am aware, however, that time to prepare is not on my side. My fingers fumble as I go, nerves getting the better of me.

“Taryn?” Madoc sweeps back the flap of my tent, making me jump. He looks around, admiring his own generosity. Then his gaze returns to me, and he frowns. “Is all well?”

“You surprised me,” I say.

“Come dine with the company,” he says.

For a moment, I try to dream up an excuse, to give him some reason for me to stay behind so that I can slip out to Grimsen’s forge. But I can’t afford his suspicion, not now, when my escape is so close. I resolve to get up in the night, long before dawn, and go then.

And so I eat with Madoc one final time. I pinch some color into my cheeks and rake back my hair into a fresh braid. And if I am particularly kind that evening, particularly deferential, if I laugh particularly loudly, it is because I know I will never do this again. I will never have him behave like this with me again. But for one final night, he’s the father I remember best, the one in whose shadow I have—for better or worse—become what I am.

CHAPTER 13

I wake to the press of a hand over my mouth. I slam my elbow into where I think the person holding me must be and am satisfied to hear a sharp intake of breath, as though I connected with a vulnerable part. There's a hushed laugh from my left. Two people, then. And one of them is not too worried about me, which is worrisome. I reach under my pillow for my knife.

"Jude," says the Roach, still laughing. "We've come to save you. Screaming would really hurt the plan."

"You're lucky I didn't stab you!" My voice comes out harsher than I intend, anger masking how terrified I was.

"I told him to watch out," the Roach says. There's a sharp sound, and light flares from a little box, illuminating the jagged planes of the Roach's goblin face. He's grinning. "But would he listen? I'd have ordered him, if not for the little matter of his being the High King."

"Cardan sent you?" I ask.

"Not exactly," says the Roach, moving the light so that I can see the person with him, the one I elbowed. The High King of Elfhame, in plain brown wool, a cloak on his back of a fabric so dark it seems to absorb light, leaf blade in the scabbard on his hip. He wears no crown on his brow, no rings on his fingers, nor gold paint limning his cheekbones. He looks every inch a spy from the Court of Shadows, down to the sneaky smile pulling at a corner of his beautiful mouth.

Looking at him, I feel a little light-headed from some combination of shock and disbelief. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I said that, too,” the Roach goes on. “Really, I miss the days when you were in charge. High Kings shouldn’t be gallivanting around like common ruffians.”

Cardan laughs. “What about uncommon ruffians?”

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, and his laugh gutters out. The Roach turns his gaze to the ceiling. I am abruptly aware that I am in a nightgown Oriana lent me, one that is entirely too diaphanous.

My cheeks go hot enough with anger that I barely feel the cold. “How did you find me?” Padding across the tent, I feel my way to where I put my dress and fumble it on, pulling it on straight over my nightclothes. I tuck my knife into a sheath.

The Roach cuts a glance at Cardan. “Your sister Vivienne. She came to the High King with a message from your stepmother. She worried it was a trap. I was worried it was a trap, too. A trap for *him*. Maybe even for myself.”

Which is why they took pains to catch me at my most vulnerable. But why come at all? And given all the disparaging things my older sister said about Cardan, why would she trust him with any of this? “Vivi went to *you*?”

“We spoke after Madoc carried you off from the palace,” Cardan begins. “And whom did I find in her little dwelling but Taryn? We all had quite a lot to say to one another.”

I try to imagine the High King in the mortal world, standing in front of our apartment complex, knocking on our door. What ridiculous thing had he worn? Had he sat down on the lumpy couch and drank coffee as though he didn’t despise everything around him?

Did he pardon Taryn when he wouldn’t pardon me?

I think of Madoc’s believing that Cardan desires to be loved. It seemed like nonsense then and seems like even more nonsense now. He charms everyone, even my own sisters. He is a gravitational force, pulling everything toward him.

But I am not so easily taken in now. If he’s here, it’s to his own purpose. Maybe allowing his queen to fall into the hands of his enemies is dangerous to him. Which means I have power. I just have to discover it and then find a way to wield it against him.

“I can’t go with you yet,” I say, drawing on thick hose and jamming my foot into a heavy boot. “There’s something I have to do. And something I need you to give me.”

“Perhaps you could just allow yourself to be rescued,” Cardan says. “For once.” Even in his plain clothes, his head bare of any crown, he cannot pretend away how much he has grown into his royal role. When a king tries to give you a gift, you’re not allowed to refuse it.

“Perhaps you could just give me what I want,” I say.

“What?” the Roach asks. “Let’s put our cards on the table, Jude. Your sisters and their friend are waiting with the horses. We need to be swift.”

My *sisters*? Both of them? And a friend—Heather? “You let them come?”

“They insisted, and since they were the ones who knew where you were, we had no choice.” The Roach is obviously frustrated with the whole situation. It’s risky to work with people who have no training. Risky to have the High King acting as your foot soldier. Risky to have the person you’re trying to extract—who might be a traitor—start backseat-driving your plan.

But that’s his problem, not mine. I walk over and take his light from him, using it to find my wineskin. “This is dosed with a sleeping draught. I was going to take this to some guards, steal a key, and free a prisoner. We were supposed to escape together.”

“Prisoner?” the Roach echoes warily.

“I saw the maps in Madoc’s war room,” I tell them. “I know the formation in which he means to sail against Elfhame, and I know the number of his ships. I know the soldiers in this encampment and which Courts are on his side. I know what Grimsen is making in his forge. If Cardan will promise me safe passage to Elfhame and to lift my exile once we’re there, I will give all that to you. Plus, you will have the prisoner delivered into your hands before he can be used against you.”

“If you’re telling the truth,” the Roach says. “And not leading us into a net of Madoc’s making.”

“I’m on my own side,” I tell him. “You of all people should understand that.”

The Roach gives Cardan a look. The High King is staring at me strangely, as though he wishes to say something and is holding himself back from it.

Finally, he clears his throat. “Since you’re mortal, Jude, I cannot hold you to your promises. But you can hold me to mine: I guarantee you safe passage. Come back to Elfhame with me, and I will give you the means to end your exile.”

“The *means* to end it?” I ask. If he thinks I don’t know better than to agree to that, he’s forgotten everything worth knowing about me.

“Come back to Elfhame, tell me what you would tell me, and your exile will end,” he says. “I promise.”

Triumph sweeps through me, followed by wariness. He tricked me once. Standing in front of him, recalling that I believed his offer of marriage was made in earnest, makes me feel small and scrubby and very, very mortal. I cannot allow myself to be tricked again.

I nod. “Madoc is keeping the Ghost prisoner. Grimsen has the key we need—”

The Roach interrupts me. “You want to *free* him? Let’s gut him like a haddock. Quicker and far more satisfying.”

“Madoc has his true name. He got it from Locke,” I tell them. “Whatever punishment the Ghost deserves, you can dole it out once he’s back in the Court of Shadows. But it’s not death.”

“Locke?” Cardan echoes, then sighs. “Yes, all right. What do we have to do?”

“I was planning to sneak into Grimsen’s forge and steal the key to the Ghost’s chains,” I say.

“I’ll help you,” says the Roach, then turns to Cardan. “But you, sire, will absolutely not. Wait for us with Vivienne and the others.”

“I am coming,” Cardan begins. “You cannot order me otherwise.”

The Roach shakes his head. “I can learn from Jude’s example, though. I can ask for a promise. If we’re spotted, if we’re set upon, promise to go back to Elfhame immediately. You must do everything in your power to get to safety, no matter what.”

Cardan glances toward me, as though for help. When I am silent, he frowns, annoyed with both of us. “Although I am wearing the cloak Mother Marrow made me, the one that will turn any blade, I still promise to run, tail between my legs. And since I have a tail, that should be amusing for everyone. Are you satisfied?”

The Roach grunts his approval, and we sneak from the tent. A wineskin full of poison sloshes softly at my hip as we slide through the shadows. Though it is late, a few soldiers move between tents, some gathered to drink or play dice and riddle games. A few sing along to a tune strummed on a lute by a goblin in leathers.

The Roach moves with perfect ease, slipping from shadow to shadow. Cardan moves behind him, more silently than I might have supposed. It gives me no pleasure to admit that he’s grown better at slyfooting than I am. I could pretend that it’s because the Folk have a natural ability, but I suspect that he also has practiced more than I have. I spread my learning too thin, although, to be fair,

I'd like to know how much time he spent studying all the things he ought to know to be *the ruler of Elfhame*. No, those studies fell to me.

With those resentful thoughts circling in my head, we approach the forge. It is quiet, its embers cold. No smoke comes from its metal chimneys.

"So you've *seen* this key?" the Roach asks, going to a window and wiping away the grime to try to peer through the pane.

"It's crystal and hanging on the wall," I say in return, seeing nothing through the cloudy glass. It's too dark inside for my eyes. "And he's begun a new sword for Madoc."

"I wouldn't mind ruining that before it's put to my throat," says Cardan.

"Look for the big one," I say. "That'll be it."

The Roach gives me a frown. I can't help not having a better description; the last time I saw it, it was barely more than a bar of metal.

"Really big," I say.

Cardan snorts.

"And we ought to be careful," I say, thinking of the jeweled spider, of Grimsen's earrings that can give beauty or steal it. "There are bound to be traps."

"We'll go in and out fast," says the Roach. "But I would feel a lot better if the both of you stayed out and let me be the one to go in."

When neither of us reply, the goblin squats down to pick the lock on the door. After applying a bit of oil to the joints, they swing open silently.

I follow him inside. The moonlight reflects off the snow in such a way that even my poor, mortal eyes can see around the workshop. A jumble of items—some jeweled, some sharp, all piled up on one another. A collection of swords rests on a hat rack, one with a handle that is coiled like a snake. But there is no mistaking Madoc's blade. It sits on a table, not yet sharpened or polished, its tang raw. Pale bone-like fragments of root rest beside it, waiting to be carved and fitted into a handle.

I lift the crystal key from the wall gingerly. Cardan stands by me, looking over the array of objects. The Roach crosses the floor toward the sword.

He's halfway there when a sound like the chime of a clock rings out. High up the wall, two inset doors open, revealing a round hole. All I have time to do before a spray of darts shoots out is point and make a sound of warning.

Cardan steps in front of me, pulling his cloak up. The metal needles glance off the fabric, falling to the floor. For a moment, we stare at each other, wide-eyed. He looks as surprised as I am that he protected me.

Then, from the hole where the darts shot, comes a metal bird. Its beak opens and closes. “Thieves!” it cries. “Thieves! Thieves!”

Outside, I hear shouts.

Then I spot the Roach across the room. His skin has turned pale. He’s about to say something, his face anguished, when he slides to one knee. The darts must have struck him. I rush over. “What was he hit with?” Cardan calls.

“Deathsweet,” I say. Probably plucked from the same patch I found in the woods. “The Bomb can help him. She can make an antidote.”

I hope she can, at least. I hope there’s time.

With surprising ease, Cardan lifts the Roach in his arms. “Tell me this wasn’t your plan,” he pleads. “Tell me.”

“No,” I say. “Of course not. I swear it.”

“Come then,” he says. “My pocket is full of ragwort. We can fly.”

I shake my head.

“*Jude*,” he warns.

We don’t have time to argue. “Vivi and Taryn are still waiting for me. They won’t know what’s happened. If I don’t go to them, they’ll be caught.”

I can tell he’s not sure if he should believe me, but all he does is shift the Roach so that he can untie his cloak with one hand. “Take this, and *do not stop*,” he orders, his expression fierce. Then he heads into the night, bearing the Roach in his arms.

I set out for the woods, neither running nor hiding, exactly, but moving swiftly, tying his cloak over my shoulders as I go. I glance back once and see the soldiers swarming around the forge—a few entering Madoc’s tent.

I said I was going straight to Vivi, but I lied. I head for the cave. There’s still time, I tell myself. The incident at the forge is an excellent distraction. If they’re looking for intruders there, they won’t be looking for me here with the Ghost.

My optimism seems borne out as I draw close. The guards aren’t at their posts. Letting out a sigh of relief, I rush inside.

But the Ghost is no longer in chains. He’s not there at all. In his place is Madoc, outfitted in his full suit of armor.

“I’m afraid you’re too late,” he says. “Much too late.”

Then he draws his sword.

CHAPTER 14

Fear steals my breath. Not only do I not have a weapon with the range of his sword, but it's unimaginable to win in battle against the person who taught me nearly everything I know. And looking at him, I can tell he's come to fight.

I draw the cloak more closely around me, inexpressibly glad for it. Without it, I would have no chance.

"When did you know it was me and not Taryn?" I ask.

"Later than I ought," he says conversationally, taking a step toward me. "But I wasn't *looking*, was I? No, it was a little thing. Your expression when you saw that map of the isles of Elfhame. Just that and every other thing you'd said and done went slant, and I saw they all belonged to you."

I am grateful to know he didn't guess from the start. Whatever he's planned, he had to do it hastily, at least. "Where's the Ghost?"

"*Garrett*," he corrects, mocking me with part of the Ghost's true name, the name the Ghost never told me, even when I might have used it to countermand the orders he'd received from Madoc. "Even if you live, you'll never stop him in time."

"Whom did you send him after?" My voice shakes a little, imagining Cardan escaping from Madoc's camp only to be shot in his own palace as he was once almost shot in his own bed.

Madoc's smile is all sharp teeth and satisfaction, as though I am being taught a lesson. "You're still loyal to that puppet. Why, Jude? Wouldn't it be better if he took an arrow through the heart in his own hall? You cannot believe he makes a better High King than I would."

I look Madoc in the eye, and my mouth makes the words before I can snatch them back. "Maybe I believe that it's time for Elfhame to be ruled by a queen."

He laughs at that, a bark of surprise. "You think Cardan will just hand over his power? To you? Mortal child, surely you know better. He exiled you. He reviled you. He will never see you as anything but beneath him."

It's nothing I haven't thought myself, yet his words still fall like blows.

"That boy is your weakness. But worry not," Madoc continues. "His reign will be short."

I take some satisfaction in the fact that Cardan was here, under his nose, and that he got away. But everything else is awful. The Ghost is gone. The Roach is poisoned. I've made mistakes. Even now, Vivi and Taryn and possibly Heather wait for me across the snow, growing more and more worried the closer dawn creeps to the horizon.

"Surrender, child," Madoc says, looking as though he feels a little sorry for me. "It's time to submit to your punishment."

I take a step backward. My hand goes to my knife on instinct, but fighting him when he is in armor *and* his weapon has the superior reach is a bad idea.

He gives me an incredulous look. "Will you defy me to the last? When I get ahold of you, I am going to keep you in chains."

"I never wanted to be your enemy," I say. "But I didn't want to be in your power, either." With that, I take off through the snow. I do the one thing I told myself I would never do.

"Do not run from me!" he shouts, a horrible echo of his final words to my mother.

The memory of her death makes my legs go faster. Clouds of air gasp from my lungs. I hear him barreling after me, hear the grunt of his breaths.

As I run, my hopes of losing him in the woods diminish. No matter how I zig and zag, he doesn't let up. My heart thunders in my chest, and I know that, above all things, I can't lead him to my sisters.

It turns out I am far from done with making mistakes.

One breath, two breaths. I draw my knife. Three breaths. I turn.

Because he isn't expecting it, he crashes toward me. I get under his guard, stabbing him in his side, striking where the plates of his armor meet. The metal

still takes the better part of the blow, but I see him wince.

Cocking back his arm, he backhands me into the snow.

“You were always good,” he says, looking down at me. “Just never good enough.”

He’s right. I learned a lot about swordplay from him, from the Ghost, but I didn’t study it *for the better part of an immortal life*. And over most of the last year, I was busy learning to be a seneschal. The only reason I made it as long as I did in our last fight is that he was poisoned. The only reason I beat Grima Mog is that she didn’t expect me to be very good at all. Madoc has my measure.

Also, against Grima Mog, I was wielding a much longer knife.

“I don’t suppose you’re willing to make this more sportsmanlike?” I say, rolling to my feet. “Maybe you could fight with one hand behind your back, to even the odds.”

He grins, circling me.

Then he swings, leaving me only to block. I feel the effort all down my arm. It’s obvious what he’s doing, but it’s still devastatingly effective. He’s wearing me down, making me block and dodge again and again, while never letting me close enough to strike him. By keeping me focused on defense, he’s exhausting me.

Despair starts to creep in. I could turn and run again, but I’d be in the same situation as before, running without anywhere to run to. As I meet his blows with my pathetic dagger, I realize how few choices I have and how they will continue to shrink.

It’s not long before I falter. His sword slices against the cloak covering my shoulder. Mother Marrow’s fabric is unscathed.

He pauses in surprise, and I strike for his hand. It’s a cheat move. But I draw blood, and he roars.

Grabbing the cloak, he winds it around his hand, hauling me toward him. The ties choke me, then rip free. His sword sinks into my side, into my stomach.

I look up at him for a moment, eyes wide.

He seems as surprised as I feel.

Somehow, despite knowing better, part of me still believed he would pull a killing blow.

Madoc, who was my father ever since he murdered my father. Madoc, who taught me how to swing a sword to actually hit someone and not just their blade. Madoc, who sat me on his knee and read to me and told me he loved me.

I fall to my knees. My legs have collapsed under me. His blade comes free, slick with my blood. My leg is wet with it. I am bleeding out.

I know what happens next. He's going to deliver the final blow. Lopping off my head. Stabbing through my heart. The strike that's a kindness, really. After all, who wants to die slowly when you can die fast?

Me.

I don't want to die fast. I don't want to die at all.

He raises his sword, hesitates. My animal instincts kick in, pushing me to my feet. My vision swims a little, but adrenaline is on my side.

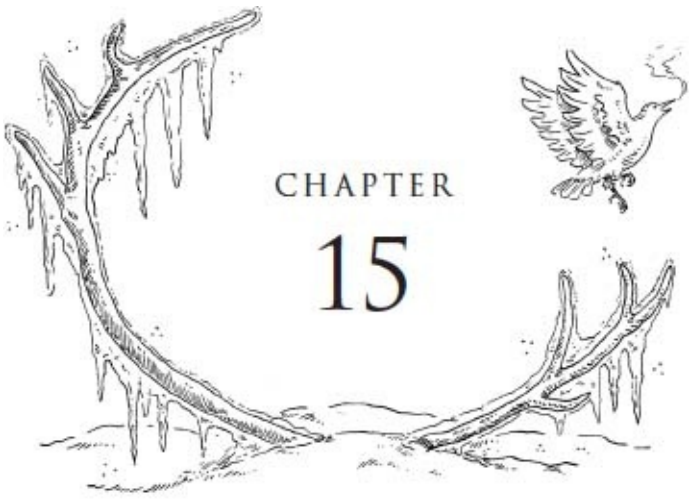
"Jude," Madoc says, and for the first time that I can recall, there's fear in his voice. Fear I don't understand.

Then three black arrows fly past me across the icy field. Two whiz over him, and the other strikes him in the shoulder of his sword arm. He howls, switches hands, and looks for his attacker. For a moment, I am forgotten.

Another arrow comes out of the darkness. This one hits him square in the chest. It strikes through his armor. Not deeply enough to kill him, but it's got to hurt.

From behind a tree, Vivi steps into view. Beside her is Taryn, wearing Nightfell on her hip. And with them, another person, who turns out not to be Heather at all.

Grima Mog, sword drawn, sits astride a ragwort pony.



CHAPTER 15

I force myself to move. Step after step, each one making my side scream with pain.

“Dad,” Vivi says. “Stay where you are. If you try to stop her, I’ve got plenty more arrows, and I’ve been waiting half my life to put you in the ground.”

“You?” Madoc sneers. “The only way you’d be the end of me is by accident.” He reaches down to snap the shaft sticking out of his chest. “Have a care. My army is just over the hill.”

“Go get them, then,” Vivi says, sounding half hysterical. “Get your whole damn army.”

Madoc looks in my direction. I must be quite a sight, blood-soaked, hand on my side. He hesitates again. “She’s not going to make it. Let me—”

Three more arrows fly toward him in answer. None of them hit, not a great sign for Vivi’s marksmanship. I just hope that he believes her missing is intentional.

A bout of dizziness overcomes me. I sag to one knee.

“Jude.” My sister’s voice comes from close by. Not Vivi. Taryn. She’s got Nightfell drawn, holding the sword in one hand and reaching toward me with the other. “Jude, you have to stand up. Stay with me.”

I must have looked as though I was going to faint. “I’m here,” I say, reaching for her hand, letting her support my weight. I stagger forward.

“Ah, Madoc,” comes Grima Mog’s tart voice. “Your child challenged me just a week back. Now I know who she really wanted to kill.”

“Grima Mog,” Madoc says, dipping his head slightly, indicating respect. “However you have come to be here, this is nothing to do with you.”

“Oh, no?” she counters, sniffing the air. Probably catching the scent of my blood. I should have warned Vivi about her when I had the chance, but however she has come to be here, I am glad of it. “I am out of work, and it seems the High Court is in need of a general.”

Madoc looks momentarily confused, not realizing that she has traveled here with Cardan himself. But then he sees his opportunity. “My daughters are out of favor with the High Court, but I have work for you, Grima Mog. I will heap you with rewards, and you will help me win a throne. Just bring my girls to me.” The last was a growl, not actually in my direction but at the lot of us. His betraying daughters.

Grima Mog looks past him, toward where the mass of his army is assembled. There’s a wistful expression on her face, probably thinking of her own troops.

“Have you cleared that offer with the Court of Teeth?” I spit out with a backward glance at him.

Grima Mog’s expression hardens.

Madoc sends an annoyed look in my direction that turns to something else, something with a bit more sorrow in it. “Perhaps you’d prefer revenge to reward. But I could give you both. Just help me.”

I knew he didn’t like Nore and Jarel.

But Grima Mog shakes her head. “Your daughters paid me in gold to protect them and fight for them. And I mean to do just that, Madoc. I have long wondered which one of us would prevail in battle. Shall we find out?”

He hesitates, looking at Grima Mog’s sword, at Vivi’s large black bow, at Taryn and Nightfell. Finally, he looks at me.

“Let me take you back to the camp, Jude,” Madoc says. “You’re dying.”

I shake my head. “I’m staying here.”

“Good-bye, then, daughter,” Madoc says. “You would have made a good redcap.”

With that, he withdraws through the snow, never turning his back to us. I watch him, too relieved at his retreat to be angry that he’s the reason I am in so much pain. I am too tired for anger. All around me the snow looks soft, like heaped-up feather beds. I imagine lying down on it and closing my eyes.

“Come on,” Vivi says to me. She sounds a little like she’s begging. “We’ve got to get you back to our camp, where the rest of the horses are. It’s not far.”

My side is on fire. But I have to move. “Sew me up,” I say, trying to shake off the creeping lethargy. “Sew me up here.”

“She’s bleeding,” says Taryn. “A lot.”

I am struck with a dull certainty that if I don’t do something now, nothing will be left to do. Madoc is right. I will die here, in the snow, in front of my sisters. I will die here, and no one will ever know there was once a mortal Queen of Faerie.

“Pack the wound with earth and leaves and then stitch it,” I say. My voice sounds as though it’s coming from far away, and I’m not sure I am making any sense. But I remember the Bomb talking about how the High King is tied to the land, how Cardan had to draw on it to heal himself. I remember she made him take a mouthful of clay.

Maybe I can heal myself, too.

“You’ll get an infection,” Taryn says. “Jude—”

“I’m not sure it will work. I’m not magic,” I tell her. I know I am leaving out parts. I know I am not explaining this the right way, but everything has become a little unmoored. “Even if I am the true queen, the land might not have anything to do with me.”

“The true queen?” Taryn echoes.

“Because she married Cardan,” Vivi says, sounding frustrated. “That’s what she’s talking about.”

“What?” Taryn says, astonished. “No.”

Then Grima Mog’s voice comes. Rough and scratchy. “Go on. You heard her. Although she must be the most foolish child ever born to get herself in this fix.”

“I don’t understand,” Taryn says.

“It’s not for us to question, is it?” Grima Mog says. “If the High Queen of Elfhame gives us an order, we do it.”

I grab for Taryn’s hand.

“You’re good at needlework,” I say with a groan. “Stitch me up. Please.”

She nods, looking a bit wild-eyed.

I can do nothing but hope as Grima Mog takes the cape from her own shoulders and spreads it out on the snow. I lie down on it and try not to wince as they rip my dress to expose my side.

I hear someone draw a sharp breath.

I look up at the dawn sky and wonder whether the Ghost has made it to the Palace of Elfhame. I recall the taste of Cardan's fingers pressed against my mouth as fresh pain blooms at my side. I bite back a scream and then another as the needle digs into the wound. Clouds blow by overhead.

"Jude?" Taryn's voice sounds like she's trying to fight back tears. "You're going to be okay, Jude. I think it's working."

But if it's working, why does she sound like that?

"Not …" I get the word out. I make myself smile. "Worried."

"Oh, Jude," she says. I feel a hand against my brow. It's so warm, which makes me think I must be very cold.

"In all my days, I have seen naught the like of this," Grima Mog says in a hushed voice.

"Hey," Vivi says, her voice wavering. She doesn't sound like herself. "Wound's closed. How are you feeling? Because some strange stuff is going on."

My skin has the sensation of being stung all over with nettles, but the fresh, hot pain is gone. I can move. I roll onto my good side and then up onto my knees. The wool beneath me is soaked through with blood. Way more blood than I am ready to believe came from me.

And around the edges of the cloak, I spot tiny white flowers pushing through the snow, most of them still buds, but a few opening as I look. I stare, not sure what I am seeing.

And then when I do understand, I can't quite take it in.

Baphen's words about the High King come to me: *When his blood falls, things grow*.

Grima Mog goes to one knee. "My queen," she says. "Command me."

I can't believe she is speaking those words to me. I can't believe the land chose me.

I had half-convinced myself I was faking being the High Queen, the way I faked my way through being the seneschal.

A moment later, everything else comes roaring back. I push myself to standing. If I don't move now, I will never get there in time. "I've got to get to the palace. Can you watch over my sisters?"

Vivi fixes me with a stern look. "You can barely stand."

"I'll take the ragwort pony." I nod toward it. "You follow with the horses you have at the campsite."

“Where’s Cardan? What happened to that goblin he was traveling with?” Vivi looks ready to scream. “They were supposed to take care of you.”

“The goblin called himself the Roach,” Taryn reminds her.

“He was poisoned,” I say, taking a few steps. My dress is open on the side, the wind blowing snow against my bare skin. I force myself to go to the horse, to touch its lacy mane. “And Cardan had to rush him to the antidote. But he doesn’t know that Madoc sent the Ghost after him.”

“The Ghost,” Taryn echoes.

“It’s ridiculous the way everyone acts like killing a king is going to make someone better at being one,” Vivi says. “Imagine if, in the mortal world, a lawyer passed the bar by killing another lawyer.”

I have no idea what my sister is talking about. Grima Mog gives me a sympathetic glance and reaches into her jacket, drawing out a small stoppered flask. “Take a slug of this,” she says to me. “It’ll help you keep going.”

I don’t even bother asking her what it is. I am far beyond that. I just toss back a long swallow. The liquid scalds all the way down my throat, making me cough. With it burning in my belly, I heave myself up onto the back of the horse.

“Jude,” Taryn says, putting her hand on my leg. “You have to be careful not to pull your stitches.” When I nod, she unclasps the sheath from around her waist, then passes it to me. “Take Nightfell,” she says.

I feel better already with a weapon in my hand.

“We’ll see you there,” Vivi warns. “Don’t fall off the horse.”

“Thank you,” I say, reaching out my hands. Vivi takes one, and then Taryn clasps the other. I squeeze.

As the pony kicks its way into the frigid air, I see the mountains below me, along with Madoc’s army. I look down at my sisters, hurrying through the snow. My sisters, who, despite everything, came for me.

CHAPTER 16

The sky warms as I fly toward Elfhame. Holding on to the mane of the ragwort horse, I drink in great gulps of salt-spray air and watch the waves peak and roll below me. Although the land kept me from death, I am not entirely whole. When I shift my weight, my side hurts. I feel the stitches holding me together as though I am a rag doll with stuffing trying to leak out.

And the closer I get, the more panicked I become.

Wouldn't it be better if he took an arrow through the heart in his own hall?

It's the Ghost's habit to plan an assassination like a trap-door spider, finding a place to strike from and then waiting for his victim to arrive. He took me to the rafters of the Court of Elfhame for my first murder and showed me how to do it. Despite the success of that assassination, nothing about the inside of the cavernous chamber was changed—I know because shortly after is when I came into power, and I'm the one who changed nothing.

My first impulse is to present myself at the gates and demand to be taken to the High King. Cardan promised to lift my exile, and whatever he intends, at least I could warn him about the Ghost. But I worry that some overeager knight might hasten to decide I should forfeit my life first and he should carry any messages I have second, if at all.

My second thought is to creep into the palace through Cardan's mother's old chamber and the secret passageway to the High King's rooms. But if Cardan

isn’t there, I will be stuck, unable to sneak past the guards who watch over his door. And sneaking back will waste a lot of time. Time I am already short on.

With the Court of Shadows bombed out and no sense of where they rebuilt, I can’t get in that way, either.

Which leaves me a single path—walking right into the brugh. A mortal in servant’s livery might normally pass unnoticed, but I am too well known for that trick to work unless I am well disguised. But I have little access to clothes. My rooms, deep in the palace, are impossible to get to. Taryn’s home, formerly Locke’s and with Locke’s servants still around, is too risky. Madoc’s stronghold, though—abandoned, with clothing that used to belong to Taryn and Vivi and me still hanging in forgotten closets …

That might work.

I fly low to the tree line, glad to be arriving in the late morning, when most Folk are still abed. I land by the stables and step off the pony. It immediately collapses back into ragwort stalks, the magic already pushed to its full measure. Sore and slow, I head for the house. In my head, my fears and hopes collide in a loop of words playing over and over again:

Please let the Roach be okay.

Let Cardan not be shot. Let the Ghost be clumsy.

Let me get inside easily. Let me stop him.

I do not pause to ask myself why I am in such a panic to save someone for whom I swore I rooted out every feeling. I will not think about that.

Inside the estate, much of the furniture is gone. Of what remains, the upholstery is ripped open, as though sprites or squirrels were nesting in it. My steps echo as I go up the familiar stairs, made strange by the emptiness of the rooms. I don’t bother going to my own old chamber. Instead, I go to Vivi’s, where I find that her closets are still full. I suspected she would have left many things behind when she went to live in the human world, and my guess is rewarded.

I find some stretchy hose in dark gray, pants, and a close-fitting jacket. Good enough. As I am changing, a wave of dizziness hits me, and I have to hang on to the doorframe until it passes and I get my balance again. Pushing up my shirt, I do what I’ve been avoiding thus far—I look at the wound. Dried-blood flecks stick all along the red pucker of where Madoc stabbed me, neat stitching holding the skin together. It’s nice, careful work, and I am grateful to Taryn for it. But just a glance at it gives me a cold, unsteady feeling. Especially the reddest spots, where there are already signs of pulling.

I leave my sliced and blood-soaked dress in a corner, along with my boots. With trembling fingers, I scrape back my hair into a tight bun, which I cover with a black scarf wound twice around my head. Once I am climbing, I don't want anything to draw the eye.

In the main part of the house, I find an out-of-tune lute hanging in Oriana's parlor, along with pots of makeup. I darken around my eyes dramatically, drawing them out into a wing, with eyebrows to match. Then I take a mask with gargoyle features that I fit over my own.

In the armory, I find a small bow that breaks down into something I can hide. Regretfully, I leave Nightfell, hidden as best I can among the other swords. I take a piece of paper from Madoc's old desk and use his quill pen to write a note of warning:

> **Expect an assassination attempt, most likely in the great hall. Keep the High King in seclusion.**

If I give that to someone to pass to Baphen or one of Cardan's personal guard, then perhaps I have a better chance of finding the Ghost before he strikes.

With lute in hand, I head for the palace on foot. It's not far, but by the time I arrive, a cold sweat has started on my brow. It's difficult to guess how hard I can push myself. On one hand, the land healed me, which has made me feel slightly invulnerable. On the other, I nearly died and am still very hurt—and whatever Grima Mog gave me to drink is wearing off.

I find a small knot of musicians and stick close to them through the gates.

"That's a beautiful instrument," says one of the players, a boy with hair the green of new leaves. He looks at me strangely, as though perhaps we know each other.

"I'll give it to you," I say impulsively. "If you will do something for me."

"What is it?" He frowns.

I take his hand and press the note I wrote into it. "Will you take this to one of the members of the Living Council, preferably Baphen? I promise you won't get in any trouble."

He wavers, uncertain.

It is at that unfortunate moment that one of the knights stops me. "You. Mortal girl in the mask," he says. "You smell like blood."

I turn. Frustrated and desperate as I am, I blurt out the first thing that comes to me. "Well, I am a *mortal*. And a *girl*, sir. We bleed every month, just like moon swells."

He waves me on, distaste on his face.

The musician looks a little horrified, too.

“Here,” I say to him. “Don’t forget the note.” Not waiting for a response, I shove the lute into his arms. Then I head into the throng. It doesn’t take long before I am swallowed up thoroughly enough by the crowd that I can ditch my mask. I make for a shadowed corner and begin my ascent into the rafters.

The climb is horrible. I keep to the shadows, moving slowly, all the while trying to see where the Ghost might be hiding, all the while dreading that Cardan might enter the hall and make himself a target. Again and again, I have to stop and get my bearings. Bouts of light-headedness come and go. Halfway up, I am sure one of my stitches rips. I touch my hand to my side, and it comes away red. Hiding in a thicket of roots, I unwind the scarf from my head and wrap it around my waist, tying it as tightly as I can bear.

I finally make it to a perch high in the curve of the ceiling where several roots converge.

There I string my bow, arrange arrows, and look across the hollow hill. He may already be here, hidden somewhere close. As the Ghost told me when he taught me how to lie in wait, the tedium is the hardest part. Keeping yourself alert, not getting so bored that you lose focus and stop paying attention to every shift in the shadows. Or, in my case, getting distracted by pain.

I need to spot the Ghost, and once I do, I need to shoot him. I cannot hesitate. The Ghost himself would tell me I’d already missed my one chance to kill him; I better not miss again.

I think of Madoc, who raised me in a house of murder. Madoc, who became so used to war that he killed his wife and would have killed me, too.

Plunge a heated sword into oil and any small flaw will turn into a crack. But quenched in blood as you were, none of you broke. You were only hardened.

If I continue the way I am, will I become like Madoc? Or will I break?

Below me, a few courtiers dance in circles that come together, cross, then part again. Having been swept up in them, they can feel utterly chaotic, but from up here, they are triumphs of geometry. I look down at the banquet tables, piled with platters of fruit, flower-studded cheeses, and decanters of clover wine. My stomach growls as late morning turns to early afternoon and more Folk come to the Court.

Baphen, the Royal Astrologer, arrives with Lady Asha on his arm. I watch them make their way around the dais, not far from the empty throne. Seven circle dances later, Nicasia comes into the hall with a few companions from the

Undersea. Then Cardan enters with his guard around him and the Blood Crown gleaming atop his ink-black curls.

When I look at him, I feel a dizzy dissonance.

He does not seem like someone who has been carrying poisoned spies through the snow, someone who has braved an enemy camp. Someone who pushed his magical cloak into my hands. He seems like the person who shoved me into the water and laughed when it closed over my head. Who tricked me.

That boy is your weakness.

I watch toasts I can't hear and see plates heaped with roasted doves on spits, leaf-wrapped sweetmeats, and stuffed plums. I feel strange, light-headed, and when I look, I see that the black scarf is nearly soaked through with blood. I shift my balance.

And I wait. And wait. And try not to bleed on anyone. My vision gets a little blurry, and I force myself to focus.

Below, I see Randalin with something in his hand, something he's waving at Cardan. The note I wrote. The boy must have delivered it after all. I tighten my hand on my crossbow. Finally, they'll get him out of here and out of danger.

Cardan doesn't look at the paper, though. He makes a dismissive gesture, as though perhaps he's already read it. But if he got my note, what is he doing here?

Unless, fool that he is, he's decided to be bait.

Just then I see a flicker of movement near some roots. I think for a second that I am just seeing shadows move. But then I spot the Bomb at the same moment her gaze goes to me and her eyes narrow. She lifts her own bow, arrow already notched.

I realize what's happening a moment too late.

A note told the Court of an assassination attempt, and the Bomb went looking for an assassin. She found someone hiding in the shadows with a weapon. Someone who had every reason to want to kill the king: me.

Wouldn't it be better if he took an arrow through the heart in his own hall?

Madoc set me up. He never sent the Ghost here. He only made me think he did, so I would come and chase after a phantom in the rafters. So I would incriminate myself. Madoc didn't have to deliver the killing blow. He made sure I would march straight to my doom.

The Bomb shoots, and I dodge. Her bolt goes past me, but my foot slips sideways in my own blood, and then I plunge backward. Off the rafter and into the open air.

For a moment, it feels like flying.

I crash onto a banquet table, knocking pomegranates to the floor. They roll in every direction, into puddles of spilled mead and shattered crystal. I am sure I ripped a lot of stitches. Everything hurts. I can't seem to get my breath.

I open my eyes to see people crowded around me. Councilors. Guards. I have no memory of closing my eyes, no idea how long I was unconscious.

"Jude Duarte," someone says. "Broken her exile to murder the High King."

"Your Majesty," says Randalin. "Give the order."

Cardan sweeps across the floor toward me, looking like a ridiculously magnificent fiend. The guards part to let him closer, but if I make a move, I have no doubt they'll stab me through.

"I lost your cloak," I croak up at him, my voice coming out all breath.

He peers down at me. "You're a liar," he says, eyes glittering with fury. "A dirty, mortal liar."

I close my eyes again against the harshness of his words. But he has no reason to believe I haven't come here to kill him.

If he sends me to the Tower of Forgetting, I wonder if he'll visit.

"Clap her in chains," says Randalin.

Never have I so wished there was a way for me to show I was telling the truth. But there isn't. No oath of mine carries any weight.

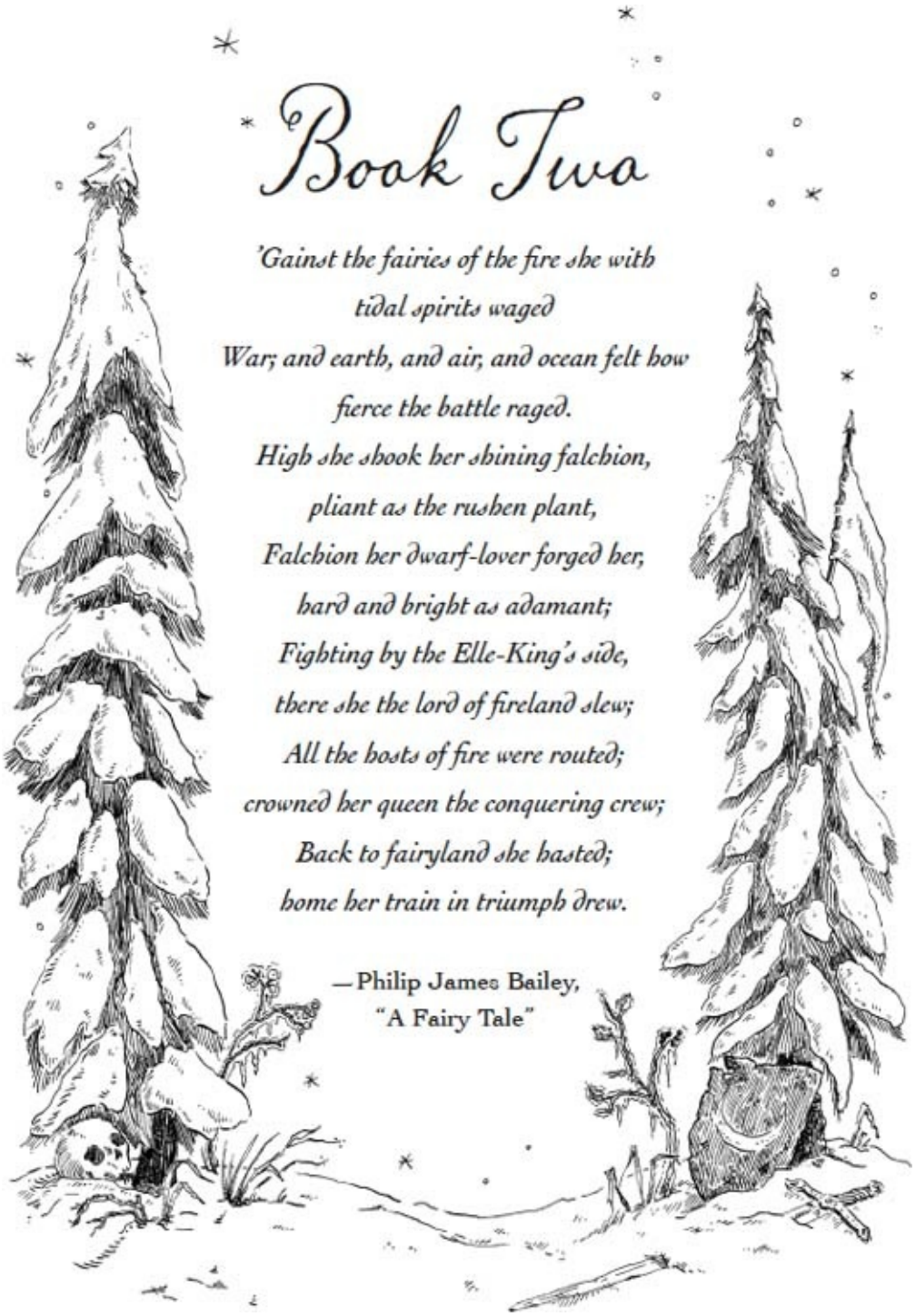
I feel a guard's hand close on my arm. Then Cardan's voice comes. "Do not touch her."

A terrible silence follows. I wait for him to pronounce judgment on me. Whatever he commands will be done. His power is absolute. I don't even have the strength to fight back.

"Whatever can you mean?" Randalin says. "She's—"

"She is my wife," Cardan says, his voice carrying over the crowd. "The rightful High Queen of Elfhame. And most definitely not in exile."

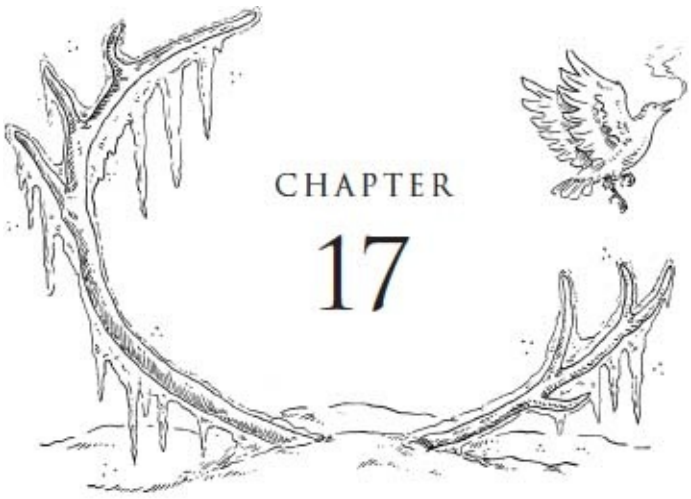
The shocked roar of the crowd rolls around me, but none of them are more shocked than I am. I try to open my eyes, try to sit up, but darkness crowds in at the edges of my vision and drags me under.



Book Two

'Gainst the fairies of the fire she with
tidal spirits waged
War; and earth, and air, and ocean felt how
fierce the battle raged.
High she shook her shining falchion,
pliant as the rushen plant,
Falchion her dwarf-lover forged her,
hard and bright as adamant;
Fighting by the Elle-King's side,
there she the lord of fireland slew;
All the hosts of fire were routed;
crowned her queen the conquering crew;
Back to fairyland she hasted;
home her train in triumph drew.

—Philip James Bailey,
"A Fairy Tale"



CHAPTER 17

I am on the High King’s enormous bed, bleeding on his majestically appointed coverlets. Everything hurts. There’s a hot, raw pain in my belly, and my head is pounding.

Cardan stands over me. His jacket is thrown on a nearby chair, the velvet soaked through with some dark substance. His white sleeves are rolled up, and he’s washing my hands with a wet cloth. Getting the blood off them.

I try to speak, but my mouth feels like it is full of honey. I slide back into the syrupy dark.

I don’t know how long I sleep. All I know is that it’s a long time. When I wake, I am afflicted with a powerful thirst. I stumble out of bed, disoriented. Several candles burn around the room. By that light, I can tell that I am still in Cardan’s chamber, in his bed, and that I am alone.

I find a pitcher of water and bring it to my lips, not bothering with a glass. I drink and drink and drink, until finally I am satisfied. I sag back onto the mattress and try to think over what’s happened. It feels like a fever dream.

I can’t stay in bed any longer. Ignoring the aches in my body, I head to the bathing room. The tub is filled, and when I touch it, the water shimmers as my

fingers trail through it. There's a chamber pot for me to use as well, something for which I am immensely grateful.

I gingerly peel off my clothes and get into the bath, scrubbing with my nails so the water can wash away the grime and crusted blood of the last several days. I scrub my face and wring out my hair. When I emerge, I feel much better.

Back in the bedroom, I go to the closet. I look through rows and rows of Cardan's absurd garments until I determine that even if they fit me, there'd be no way I could wear any of them. I put on a voluminous puffy-sleeved shirt and take his least ridiculous cloak—black wool trimmed in deer fur and embroidered with a border of leaves—to wrap around myself. Then I make my way through the hall to my old rooms.

The knights outside his door notice my bare feet and bare ankles and the way I am clutching the robe. I am not sure what they suppose, but I refuse to be embarrassed. I summon my newly minted status as the Queen of Elfhame and shoot them such a withering look that they turn their faces away.

When I enter my old rooms, Tatterfell looks startled from where she sits on the couch, playing a game of Uno with Oak.

"Oh," I say. "Whoops."

"Hi," Oak says uncertainly.

"What are you doing here?" He flinches, and I regret the harshness of my words. "I'm sorry," I say, coming around the couch and bending down to pull him into a hug. "I'm happy you're here. I'm just surprised." I do not add that I am worried, although I am. The Court of Elfhame is a dangerous place for everyone, but it is particularly dangerous for Oak.

Still, I lean my head against his neck and drink in the scent of him, loam and pine needles. My little brother, who is squeezing me so tightly that it hurts, one of his horns scraping lightly against my jaw.

"Vivi's here, too," he says, letting me go. "And Taryn. And *Heather*."

"Really?" For a moment, we share a significant look. I'd hoped Heather might get back together with Vivi, but I am stunned she was willing to make another trip to Elfhame. I figured it was going to be a long time before she was okay with more than a very cursory amount of Faerie. "Where are they?"

"At dinner, with the High King," says Tatterfell. "This one didn't want to go, so he had a tray sent up." She injects the words with a familiar disapproval. I am sure she thinks rejecting the honor of royal company is a sign that Oak is spoiled.

I think it's a sign he's been paying attention.

But I am more interested in the dinner tray, with half-eaten portions of delectable things on silver plates. My stomach growls. I am not sure how long it's been since I had a real meal. Without asking for permission, I go over and begin to gobble up cold strips of duck and chunks of cheese and figs. There's some too-strong tea in a pot, and I drink that, too, straight from the spout.

My hunger is great enough to make me suspicious. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Well, they drugged you," Oak says with a shrug. "So you've woken up before, but not for too long. Not like this."

That's disturbing, partially because I don't remember it and partially because I must have been hogging Cardan's bed this whole time, but I refuse to think too much about it, the way I refused to think about sweeping out of the High King's chambers in nothing but his shirt and cloak. Instead, I pick out one of my old seneschal outfits—a gown that is a long column of black with silver-tipped cuffs and collar. It is perhaps too plain for a queen, but Cardan is extravagant enough for both of us.

When I am dressed, I go back into the living space.

"Will you do my hair?" I ask Tatterfell.

She huffs to her feet. "I should hope so. You can hardly walk around the way you came in here." I am swept back into the bedroom, where she shoos me toward my dressing table. There, she braids my brown locks in a halo around my head. Then she paints my lips and eyelids in a pale rose color.

"I wanted your hair to suggest a crown," she says. "But then I suppose you'll have a real coronation at some point."

The thought makes my head swim, a sense of unreality creeping in. I do not understand Cardan's game, and that worries me.

I think of how Tatterfell once urged me to marry. The memory of that, and my certainty that I wouldn't, makes it even stranger that she is here, doing my hair as she did then. "You made me look regal anyway," I say, and her beetle-black eyes meet mine in the mirror. She smiles.

"Jude?" I hear a soft voice. Taryn.

She's come in from the other room, in a gown of spun gold. She looks magnificent—roses in her cheeks and a brightness in her eyes.

"Hey," I say.

"You're awake!" she says, rushing into the room. "Vivi, she's awake."

Vivi walks in, wearing a suit of bottle-green velvet. "You nearly died, you know? You nearly died *again*."

Heather follows in a pale blue gown with edges of the same pink that sits in her tight curls. She gives me a sympathetic grin, which I appreciate. It's good to have one person who doesn't know me well enough to be angry.

"Yes," I say. "I know."

"You keep rushing into danger," Vivi informs me. "You've got to stop acting as though Court politics is some kind of extreme sport and stop chasing the adrenaline high."

"I couldn't help that Madoc kidnapped me," I point out.

Vivi goes on, ignoring me. "Yeah, and the next thing we know, the High King is on our doorstep looking ready to tear down the whole apartment complex to find you. And when we finally hear from you through Oriana, it's not like we could trust *anyone*. So we had to hire a *cannibal redcap* to come with us, just in case. And it's a good thing we did—"

"Seeing you lie in the snow—you were so pale, Jude," Taryn interrupts. "And when things started budding and blooming around you, I didn't know what to think. Flowers and vines pushed right up through the ice. Then color came back into your skin, and you got up. I couldn't believe it."

"Yeah," I say softly. "I was fairly surprised myself."

"Does this mean you're *magical*?" Heather asks, which is a fair question. Mortals are not supposed to be magical.

"I don't know," I tell her.

"I still can't believe you married Prince Cardan," Taryn says.

I feel an obscure need to justify myself. I want to deny that desire came into it, want to claim that I was entirely practical when I agreed. Who wouldn't want to be the Queen of Faerie? Who wouldn't make the bargain I made?

"It's just—you *hated* him," Taryn says. "And then I found out he was under your control the whole time. So I thought maybe you *still* hated him. I mean—I guess it's possible that you hate him now and that he hates you, too, but it's confusing."

A knock on the door interrupts her. Oak runs over to open it. As though summoned by our discussion, the High King is there, surrounded by his guard.

CHAPTER 18

Cardan is wearing a high jeweled collar of jet on a stiff black doublet. Over the tops of his pointed ears are knifelike caps of gold, matching the gold along his cheekbones. His expression is remote.

"Walk with me," he says, leaving little room for refusal.

"Of course." My heart speeds, despite myself. I hate that he saw me when I was at my most vulnerable, that he let me bleed all over his spider-silk sheets.

Vivi catches my hand. "You're not well enough."

Cardan raises his black brows. "The Living Council is eager to speak with her."

"No doubt," I say, then look at my sisters, Heather and Oak behind them. "And Vivi should be happy, because the only danger anyone has ever been in at a Council meeting is of being bored to death."

I let go of my sister. The guards fall in behind us. Cardan gives me his arm, causing me to walk at his side, instead of behind him the way I would have as his seneschal. We make our way through the halls, and when we pass courtiers, they bow. It's extremely unnerving.

"Is the Roach okay?" I ask, low enough not to be overheard.

"The Bomb has not yet discovered how to wake him," Cardan says. "But there is hope that she yet will."

At least he's not dead, I remind myself. But if he sleeps for a hundred years, I will be in my grave before he opens his eyes again.

"Your father sent a message," Cardan says, glancing at me sideways. "It was very unfriendly. He seems to blame me for the death of his daughter."

"Ah," I say.

"And he has sent soldiers to the low Courts with promises of a new regime. He urges them to not hesitate, but to come to Elfhame and hear his challenge to the crown." Cardan says all this neutrally. "The Living Council waits to hear all you know about the sword and his maps. They found my descriptions of the camp to be sadly inadequate."

"They can wait a little longer," I say, forcing out the words. "I need to talk to you."

He looks surprised and a little uncertain.

"It won't take long." The last thing I want is to have this conversation, but the longer I put it off, the larger it will loom in my mind. He ended my exile—and while I extracted a promise from him to do that, he had no reason to declare me queen. "Whatever your scheme is, whatever you are planning to hold over me, you might as well tell me now, before we're in front of the whole Council. Make your threats. Do your worst."

"Yes," he says, turning down a corridor in the palace that led outside. "We do need to talk."

It is not long before we come to the royal rose garden. The guards stop at the gate, letting us go on alone. As we make our way down a path of shimmering quartz steps, everything is hushed. The wind carries floral scents through the air, a wild perfume that doesn't exist outside of Faerie and reminds me at once of home and of menace.

"I assume you weren't actually trying to shoot me," Cardan says. "Since the note was in your handwriting."

"Madoc sent the Ghost—" I say, then stop and try again. "I thought that there was going to be an attempt on your life."

Cardan gazes at a rosebush with petals so black and glossy they look like patent leather. "It was terrifying," he says, "watching you fall. I mean, you're generally terrifying, but I am unused to fearing *for* you. And then I was furious. I am not sure I have ever been that angry before."

"Mortals are fragile," I say.

"Not you," he says in a way that sounds a little like a lament. "You never break."

Which is ridiculous, as hurt as I am. I feel like a constellation of wounds, held together with string and stubbornness. Still, I like hearing it. I like everything he's saying all too well.

That boy is your weakness.

"When I came here, pretending to be Taryn, you said you'd sent me messages," I say. "You seemed surprised I hadn't gotten any. What was in them?"

Cardan turns to me, hands clasped behind his back. "Pleading, mostly. Beseeching you to come back. Several indiscreet promises." He's wearing that mocking smile, the one he says comes from nervousness.

I close my eyes against frustration great enough to make me scream. "Stop playing games," I say. "You sent me into exile."

"Yes," he says. "That. I can't stop thinking about what you said to me, before Madoc took you. About it being a trick. You meant marrying you, making you queen, sending you to the mortal world, all of it, didn't you?"

I fold my arms across my chest protectively. "*Of course it was a trick*. Wasn't that what you said in return?"

"But that's what you do," Cardan says. "You trick people. Nicasia, Madoc, Balekin, Orlagh. Me. I thought you'd admire me a little for it, that I could trick *you*. I thought you'd be angry, of course, but not quite like this."

I stare at him, openmouthed. "What?"

"Let me remind you that I didn't know you'd murdered my brother, the ambassador to the Undersea, until that very morning," he says. "My plans were made in haste. And perhaps I was a little annoyed. I thought it would pacify Queen Orlagh, at least until all promises were finalized in the treaty. By the time you guessed the answer, the negotiations would be over. Think of it: *I exile Jude Duarte to the mortal world. Until and unless she is pardoned by the crown*." He pauses. "*Pardoned by the crown*. Meaning by the King of Faerie. Or its queen. You could have returned anytime you wanted."

Oh.

Oh.

It wasn't an accident, his choice of words. It wasn't infelicitous. It was deliberate. A riddle made just for me.

Maybe I should feel foolish, but instead, I feel furiously angry. I turn away from him and walk, swiftly and completely directionless through the garden. He runs after me, grabbing my arm.

I haul around and slap him. It's a stinging blow, smearing the gold on his cheekbone and causing his skin to redden. We stare at each other for long moments, breathing hard. His eyes are bright with something entirely different from anger.

I am in over my head. I am drowning.

"I didn't mean to hurt you." He grabs my hand, possibly to keep me from hitting him again. Our fingers lace together. "No, it's not that, not exactly. I didn't think I *could* hurt you. And I never thought you would be afraid of me."

"And did you like it?" I ask.

He looks away from me then, and I have my answer. Maybe he doesn't want to admit to that impulse, but he has it.

"Well, I was hurt, and yes, you scare me." Even as I am speaking, I wish I could snatch back the words. Perhaps it is exhaustion or having been so close to death, but the truth pours out of me in a devastating rush. "You've always scared me. You gave me every reason to fear your capriciousness and your cruelty. I was afraid of you even when you were tied to that chair in the Court of Shadows. I was afraid of you when I had a knife to your throat. And I am scared of you now."

Cardan looks more surprised than he did when I slapped him.

He was always a symbol of everything about Elfhame that I couldn't have, everything that would never want me. And telling him this feels a little like throwing off a heavy weight, except that weight is supposed to be my armor, and without it, I am afraid I am going to be entirely exposed. But I keep talking anyway, as though I no longer have control of my tongue. "You despised me. When you said you wanted me, it felt like the world had turned upside down.

"But sending me into exile, that made sense." I meet his gaze. "That was an entirely right-side-up Cardan move. And I hated myself for not seeing it coming. And I hate myself for not seeing what you're going to do to me next."

He closes his eyes. When he opens them, he releases my hand and turns so I can't see his face. "I can see why you thought what you did. I suppose I am not an easy person to trust. And maybe I ought not to be trusted, but let me say this: I trust *you*."

He takes a deep breath. "You may recall that I did not want to be the High King. And that you did not consult me before plopping this crown on my head. You may further recollect that Balekin didn't want me to keep the title and that the Living Council never took a real shine to me."

“I suppose,” I say, though none of those things seemed particularly unusual. Balekin wanted the crown for himself, and the Living Council wanted Cardan to show up for meetings, which he seldom did.

“There was a prophecy given when I was born. Usually Baphen is uselessly vague, but in this case, he made it clear that should I rule, I would make a very poor king.” He pauses. “The destruction of the crown, the ruination of the throne—a lot of dramatic language.”

I recall Oriana said something about Cardan’s being ill-fated, and so did Madoc, but this is more than bad luck. It makes me think of the coming battle. It makes me think of my dream of the star charts and the spilled inkpot of blood.

Cardan turns back to me, gazing down at me as he did in my imaginings. “When you forced me into working for the Court of Shadows, I never thought of the things I could do—frightening people, charming people—as *talents*, no less ones that might be valuable. But *you* did. You showed me how to use them to be *useful*. I never minded being a minor villain, but it’s possible I might have grown into something else, a High King as monstrous as Dain. And if I did—if I fulfilled that prophecy—I *ought* to be stopped. And I believe that you would stop me.”

“Stop you?” I echo. “Sure. If you’re a huge jerk and a threat to Elfhame, I’ll pop your head right off.”

“Good.” His expression is wistful. “That’s one reason I didn’t want to believe you’d joined up with Madoc. The other is that I want you here by my side, as my queen.”

It’s a strange speech, and there’s little of love in it, but it doesn’t seem like a trick, either. And if it stings a little that he admires me primarily for my ruthlessness, well, I suppose there should be some comfort that he admires me at all. He wants me with him, and maybe he wants me in other ways, too. Desiring more than that from him is just greed.

He gives me a half smile. “But now that you’re High Queen and back in charge, I won’t be doing anything of consequence anyway. If I destroy the crown and ruin the throne, it will only be through neglect.”

That startles a laugh out of me. “So that’s your excuse for not doing any of the work? You must be draped in decadence at all times because if you aren’t kept busy, you might fulfill some half-baked prophecy?”

“Exactly.” He touches my arm, his smile fading. “Would you like me to inform the Council that you will see them another time? It will be a novelty to have me make your excuses.”

“No. I’m ready.” My head swims with everything we’ve talked about. My palm is smeared with gold. When I look at him, I see the remaining powder has been smudged over his cheekbone by the strike of my hand. I can’t stop staring at it, can’t stop thinking about the way he looked at me when he caught my fingers. That’s the only excuse I have for not noticing that he’s led me back to his rooms, which are, I suppose, also mine since we’re married.

“They’re *here*?” I say.

“I believe it was meant to be an ambush,” he informs me with a twist of his mouth. “As you know, they are very nosy and hate the idea of being kept out of anything important, including royal convalescing.”

What I am imagining is how terrible it would have been to be awakened by the entire Living Council when I was still rumpled and filthy and naked. I draw on that anger and hope it makes me seem imperious.

Inside, Fala the Grand Fool dozes on the floor beside the fire. The rest of the Council—Randalin with his ram horns, Baphen stroking his blue beard, sinister Mikkel from the Unseelie Court, and insectile Nihuar from the Seelie—are seated around the room, no doubt annoyed by the wait.

“Queen Seneschal,” Fala says, leaping to his feet and making an extravagant bow.

Randalin glowers. The others begin to rise. I feel tremendously awkward.

“No, please,” I say. “Remain as you are.”

The councilors and I have had a contentious relationship. As Cardan’s seneschal, I frequently denied them audiences with the High King. I think they suspected my chief qualification for the position was my ability to lie for him.

I doubt they believe I have any qualifications for my new position.

But before they can say so, I launch into a description of Madoc’s camp. Soon, I am re-creating the naval maps I saw and making lists of every faction fighting on his side. I explain what I saw in Grimsen’s forge; Cardan chimes in with a few items he recalls.

The numbers are on Elfhame’s side. And whether or not I can draw on the power of the land, I know that Cardan can. Of course, there’s still the matter of the sword.

“A duel?” Mikkel says. “Perhaps he mistakes the High King for someone more bloodthirsty. You, perhaps?”

From him, that’s not exactly an insult.

“Well, Jude did get herself tangled up with *Grima Mog*.” Randalin has never much liked me, and I don’t think recent events have improved his feelings at all.

“Leave it to you to spend your exile recruiting infamous butchers.”

“So *did* you murder Balekin?” Nihuar asks me, clearly able to put off her curiosity no longer.

“Yes,” I say. “After he poisoned the High King.”

“Poisoned?” she echoes in astonishment, looking at Cardan.

He shrugs, lounging in a chair, looking bored as ever. “You can hardly expect me to mention every little thing.”

Randalin rises to the bait, looking puffed up with annoyance. “Your Majesty, we were led to believe that her exile was justified. And that if you wished to marry, you would consult—”

“Perhaps at least one of you could have told us—” Baphen says, talking over Randalin.

This was what they really wanted to discuss, I suppose. Whether there was any way they could prevent what’s already occurred and invalidate my elevation to High Queen.

Cardan puts up a hand. “No, no, enough. It’s all too tedious to explain. I declare this meeting at an end.” His fingers make a flicking gesture toward the door. “Leave us. I tire of the lot of you.”

I have a long way to go before I can manage that level of shameless arrogance.

It works, however. They grumble but rise and go out. Fala blows me a kiss as he departs.

For a moment, we are alone.

Then there is a sharp rap on the secret door to the High King’s chamber. Before either of us can get up, the Bomb pushes her way through, striding into the room with a tray of tea things. Her white hair has been pulled up into a topknot, and if she is tired or grieving, none of it shows on her face.

“Long live Jude,” she says with a wink, setting down the tray on a table with a clatter of the pots and saucers and whatnot. “No thanks to me.”

I grin. “Good thing you’re a lousy shot.”

She holds up a packet of herbs. “A poultice. To draw any fever from the blood and help the patient heal faster. Unfortunately, it won’t draw the sting from your tongue.” She takes some bandages from her coat and turns to Cardan. “*You* should go.”

“This is *my* room,” he points out, affronted. “And that’s *my* wife.”

“So you keep telling everyone,” the Bomb says. “But I am going to take out her stitches, and I don’t think you want to watch that.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe he’d like to hear me scream.”

“I would,” Cardan says, standing. “And perhaps one day I will.” On the way out, his hand goes to my hair. A light touch, barely there, and then gone.

Taking out stitches is slow and painful. My sister does beautiful needlework, and it seems that she embroidered my stomach and side, leaving the Bomb with an endless stretch of tiny stitches that need to be individually snipped, the threads teased out of the skin, and then salve applied.

"Ow!" I say for what seems like the millionth time. "Do these really need to come out?"

The Bomb gives a long-suffering sigh. "They should have been removed days ago."

I bite my tongue against another howl of pain. When I can speak again, I try to distract myself by asking, "Cardan said you're hopeful about the Roach."

Bent over me, she smells of cordite and bitter herbs. Her expression is wry. "I'm always hopeful when it comes to him."

There is a soft tap on the door. The Bomb looks at me expectantly.

"Come in?" I call, lowering my dress to cover the mess of my stomach.

A messenger with small moth wings and a nervous expression enters the room, granting me a temporary reprieve from being poked. She sinks into a bow, looking a bit like she's going to faint. Maybe it's the small pile of blood-covered thread.

I consider explaining, but that's supposed to be beneath the dignity of a queen, and it would only embarrass us both. Instead, I give her what I hope is an

encouraging smile. “Yes?”

“Your Highness,” she says. “Lady Asha wishes to see you. She has sent me to bring you directly to the chamber where she languishes.”

The Bomb snorts. “Languishes,” she mouths.

“You may tell her that I will see her as soon as I am able,” I say with as much grandeur as I can muster.

Although it’s clearly not the answer her mistress wanted me to give, the messenger can do little to challenge it. She hesitates a moment, then seems to realize it herself. Abashed, she departs with another bow.

“You’re the High Queen of Elfhame. Act like it,” the Bomb says, fixing me with a serious expression. “You shouldn’t let anyone command you. Not even me.”

“I told her no!” I protest.

She begins to pick out another stitch, not particularly gently. “Lady Asha doesn’t get to be put *next* on your schedule just for asking. And she shouldn’t make the queen come to her. Especially when *you* were hurt. She’s lying in bed recuperating from the trauma of watching while you fell from the ceiling.”

“Ouch,” I say, not sure if I am reacting to the tug against my flesh, her completely justified scolding, or her scathing assessment of Lady Asha.

Once the Bomb is finished with me, I ignore her excellent counsel and head toward Lady Asha’s chamber. It’s not that I disagree with any of her advice. But I would like to say something to Cardan’s mother, and now seems like an excellent time to do so.

As I head through the hall, I am stopped by Val Moren, who places his walking stick in my path. The eyes of the last High King’s mortal seneschal are lit with malice.

“How does it feel to rise to such dizzying heights?” he asks. “Afraid you’ll take another tumble?”

I scowl at him. “I bet you’d like to know how it feels.”

“Unfriendly, my queen,” he says with a grunt. “Ought not you be kind to the least of your subjects?”

“You want kindness?” I used to be afraid of him, of his dire warnings and wild eyes, but I am not afraid of him now. “All those years, you could have helped me and my sister. You could have taught us how to survive here as

mortals. But you left us to figure it out on our own, even though we're the same."

He peers at me through narrowed eyes. "*The same?*" he demands. "Do you think a seed planted in goblin soil grows to be the same plant as it would have in the mortal world? No, little seed. I do not know what you are, but we are not the same. I came here fully grown."

And with that, he walks on, leaving me scowling after him.

I find Lady Asha in a canopied bed, her head propped up on pillows. Her horns don't look as though they make it easy for her to find a comfortable position, but I guess when they're your horns, you're used to them.

Two courtiers, one in a gown and the other in trousers and a coat with an opening for delicate wings in the back, sit in chairs beside her. One reads from a collection of gossipy sonnets. The servant girl who brought me Lady Asha's message lights candles, and the scents of sage, clove, and lavender permeate the air.

When I come in, the courtiers remain seated far longer than they ought, and when they rise to make their bows, they do so with pointed lethargy. Lady Asha stays abed, gazing at me with a slight smile, as though we both know a distasteful secret.

I think of my own mother, as I have not in a long time. I recall the way she threw back her head when she laughed. How she let us stay up late during the summer, chasing one another through the backyard in the moonlight, my hands sticky with melted Popsicle, the stink of Dad's forge heavy in the air. I recall waking in the afternoon, cartoons playing in the living room and mosquito bites blooming on my skin. I think of the way she would bring me in from the car when I fell asleep on long drives. I think of the drowsy, warm feeling of being carried through the air.

Who would I be without any of that?

"Don't worry about getting up," I tell Lady Asha. She looks surprised, and then offended, by the implication that she owes me the courtesies of my new position. The courtier in the coat has a gleam in his eye that makes me think he is going to go and tell absolutely everyone what he's witnessed. I doubt very much that the story will flatter me.

"We will speak later," Lady Asha says to her friends, a frigid tone in her voice. They seem to take being dismissed in stride. With another bow—this one made carefully to both of us—they depart, barely waiting until the door shuts to begin whispering to each other.

“Your visit must be a kindness,” Cardan’s mother says. “With you so recently returned to us. And so recently coming into a throne.”

I force myself not to smile. The inability to lie makes for some interesting sentences.

“Come,” she says. “Sit a moment with me.”

I know the Bomb would say that this is another instance where I am letting her tell me what to do, but it seems petty to object to such minor high-handedness.

“When I brought you from the Tower of Forgetting to my den of spies,” I say, in case she needs reminding of why she should worry about making me angry, “you said you wanted to be away from the High King, your son. But you two seem to have made up. You must be so pleased.”

She makes a pout. “Cardan was not an easy child to love, and he’s only grown worse with time. He would scream to be held, and then once picked up he would bite and kick his way out of my arms. He would find a game and obsess over it until it was conquered, then burn all the pieces. Once you’re no longer a challenge, he will despise you.”

I stare at her. “And you’re giving me this warning out of the kindness of your heart?”

She smiles. “I am giving you this warning because it doesn’t matter. You’re already doomed, Queen of Elfhame. You already love him. You already loved him when you questioned me about him instead of your own mother. And you will still love him, mortal girl, long after his feelings evaporate like morning dew.”

I can’t help thinking of Cardan’s silence when I asked if he liked that I was afraid. A part of him will always delight in cruelty. Even if he has changed, he could change again.

I hate being a fool. I hate the idea of my emotions getting the better of me, of making me weak. But my fear of being a fool turned me into one. I should have guessed the answer to Cardan’s riddle long before I did. Even if I didn’t understand it was a riddle, it was still a loophole to exploit. But I was so shamed by falling for his trick that I stopped looking for ways around it. And even after I discovered one, I made no plan to use it.

Maybe it isn’t the worst thing to want to be loved, even if you’re not. Even if it hurts. Maybe being human isn’t always being weak.

Maybe it was the shame that was the problem.

But it’s not as though my own fears are the only reason I was in exile for so long. “Is that why you intercepted the letters he sent? To protect me? Or was it because you’re afraid that he won’t tire of me? Because, my lady, I will always be a challenge.”

I admit, it’s a guess about her and the letters. But not many people would have the access and power to stop a message from the High King. No ambassador from a foreign kingdom. Probably not a member of the Living Council. And I don’t think Lady Asha likes me very much.

She regards me mildly. “Many things become lost. Or destroyed.”

Given that she can’t lie, that’s practically a confession.

“I see,” I say, standing. “In that case, I will take your advice in exactly the spirit with which you gave it.” As I look back at her from the door, I say what I believe she will least like to hear. “And next time, I will expect your curtsy.”

I am halfway down the hall when a pixie knight rushes up to me, her armor polished to a shine that reflects her cerulean skin. “Your Majesty, you must come quickly,” she says, putting her hand to her heart.

“Fand?” When we were at the palace school, we both dreamed of knighthood. It seems that one of us achieved it.

She looks at me as though surprised at being remembered, although it wasn’t very long ago. I suppose she, too, believes I have ascended to dizzying and perhaps memory-altering heights.

“*Sir* Fand,” I correct myself, and she smiles. I grin back at her. Although we were not friends, we were friend*ly*—and for me, in the High Court, that was a rarity. “Why do I have to come quickly?”

Her expression goes grave again. “A battalion from the Undersea is in the throne room.”

“Ah,” I say, and let her escort me through the halls. Some Folk bow as I pass. Others quite pointedly do not. Not sure how to behave, I ignore both.

“You ought to have your own guard,” Sir Fand says, keeping pace just behind me.

Everyone seems very fond of telling me how I should do this job. But, at least in this case, my silence is apparently enough of an answer for her to fall silent.

When we get to the brugh, it is mostly empty. Randalin is wringing his wizened hands as he studies the soldiers of the Undersea—selkies and the pale-skinned Folk that make me think of those they called *drowned ones*. Nicasia stands in front of them, in armor of iridescent scales, her hair dressed with shark teeth, clasping Cardan's hands in hers. Her eyes are red-rimmed and swollen, as though she's been weeping. His dark head is bent toward hers, and I am reminded that they were once lovers.

She whirls when she sees me, wild with anger. "This is your father's doing!"

I take a step back in surprise. "What?"

"Queen Orlagh," Cardan says with what seems like slightly exaggerated calm. "Apparently, she was struck with something like elf-shot. It burrowed deep into her flesh, but it seems to have stopped short of her heart. When there is an attempt to remove it, it seems to resist magical and nonmagical extraction. It moves as though it's alive, but there may be some iron in it."

I stop, my mind reeling. The Ghost. That's where Madoc sent him, to the sea. Not to *kill* the queen, which would anger the sea Folk and bring them more firmly to Cardan's side, but to wound her in such a way that he could hold her death over her. How could her people risk fighting Madoc when he would stay his hand so long as Orlagh stayed put?

"I'm so sorry." It's an utterly human thing to say and utterly useless, but I blurt it out anyway.

Nicasia curls her lip. "You ought to be." After a moment, she releases Cardan's hand with some apparent regret. She would have married him once. I very much doubt that my appearance has made her give up the notion. "I must go to my mother's side. The Court of the Undersea is in chaos."

Once, Nicasia and her mother held me captive, locked me in a cage, and tried to take my will from me. Sometimes, in dreams, I am still there, still floating in the dark and the cold.

"We are your allies, Nicasia," Cardan reminds her. "Should you need us."

"I count on you to avenge my mother, if nothing else," she says. Then, with another hostile glance in my direction, she turns and leaves the hall. The Undersea soldiers fall into step behind her.

I cannot even be annoyed with her. I am reeling from the success of Madoc's gambit—and the sheer ambition of it. The death of Orlagh would be no small thing to engineer; she is one of the ancient and established powers of Faerie, older even than Eldred. But to wound her in such a way seems harder still.

“Now that Orlagh is weak, it’s possible there will be challengers to her throne,” Randalin says with a certain amount of regret, as though doubting Nicasia would be up to what was required of her. “The sea is a brutal place.”

“Did they catch the would-be assassin?” I ask.

Randalin frowns at me, as he often does when I ask a question to which he doesn’t know the answer but doesn’t wish to admit it. “I do not believe so. Had they, I am sure they would have told us.”

Which means he may come here after all. Which means Cardan is still in danger. And we have far fewer allies than we did before. This is the problem with playing defense—you can never be sure where your enemy will strike, so you expend more resources trying to cover every eventuality.

“The generals will wish to adjust their plans,” Randalin says with a significant look in Cardan’s direction. “Perhaps we should summon them.”

“Yes,” says Cardan. “Yes, I suppose we should.”

We repair to the strategy rooms and are greeted by a cold dinner of duck eggs, currant bread, and paper-thin slices of roasted boar. The master of servants, a large, spidery woman, waits for us, along with the generals. The discussion quickly takes on a festival air, with half of it turning to entertaining the coming lords and ladies of the low Courts and the other half planning a war.

The new Grand General turns out to be an ogre named Yorn. He was appointed during my exile. I know nothing to his detriment, but he has a nervous demeanor. He sweeps in with three of his generals and a lot of questions about the maps and materials the Living Council passed on from me. Tentatively, he begins to reimagine our naval strategy.

Once more, I try to guess what Madoc’s next move might be. I feel as though I have so many pieces of the puzzle but fail to see how they fit together. What I do know is that he’s cutting off the exits, pruning the variables, reducing our ability to surprise him, so that his plans are most likely to succeed.

I can only hope that we can surprise him in turn.

“We should just attack the moment his ships appear on the horizon,” says Yorn. “Not give him a chance to call for parlay. It will be harder without the aid of the Undersea, but not impossible. We still have the greater force.”

Due to the Folk’s customs of hospitality, if Madoc requests it, he and a small party will be welcomed into Elfhame for the purpose of discussing alternatives to war. So long as he doesn’t raise a weapon, he can eat and drink and talk with us for however much time he likes. When he is ready to depart, the conflict will start right where it left off.

“He’ll send a bird ahead,” says Baphen. “And his ships may well come shrouded in fog or shadows. We do not know what magic he has at his disposal.”

“He wants to duel,” I say. “As soon as he draws a weapon, he will break the terms of parlay. And he will not be allowed to bring a large force onto the land for the purposes of discussing peace.”

“Better if we ring the isles in ships,” Yorn says, once again moving strategy pieces around a beautifully drawn map of Insweal, Insmire, Insmoor, and Insear that lies on the table. “We can prevent Madoc’s soldiers from landing. Shoot down any birds that come our way. We have allies from the low Courts to add to our force.”

“What if Madoc gets aid from the Undersea?” I ask. The others look at me in astonishment.

“But we have a treaty,” Randalin says. “Perhaps you didn’t hear that, because __”

“Yes, you have a treaty *now*,” I say, not wanting to be reminded of my exile again. “But Orlagh could pass the crown to Nicasia. If she did, a Queen Nicasia would be free to make a new alliance with Madoc, just as once the Court of Teeth put a changeling on their throne, they were free to march against Elfhame. And Nicasia might ally with Madoc if he would make her mother well.”

“Do you think that’s likely to happen?” Yorn asks Cardan, frowning over his plans.

The High King makes a nonchalant gesture. “Jude likes to suppose the worst of both her enemies and her allies. Her reward is occasionally being wrong about us.”

“Hard to remember an occasion of that,” I say to him under my breath.

He lifts a single brow.

Fand steps into the room at that moment, looking very aware that she doesn’t belong. “Your pardon, but I—I have a message for the queen,” she says with a nervous stammer in her voice. “From her sister.”

“As you can see, the queen—” Randalin begins.

“Which sister?” I demand, crossing the room to her.

“Taryn,” she says, looking a lot calmer now that she is speaking only to me. Her voice drops low. “She said to meet her in the High King’s old dwelling.”

“When?” I ask, my heart beating double-time. Taryn is a careful person, mindful of proprieties. She is fond neither of cryptic messages nor sinister meeting places. If she wants me to come to Hollow Hall, something is very wrong.

“As soon as you can get away,” Fand says.

“I’ll come now,” I say, and then turn back to the councilors, the generals, and the High King. “There’s been a family difficulty. You will excuse me.”

“I will accompany you,” Cardan says, rising. I open my mouth to explain all the reasons that he can’t go. The problem is that as I look up into his gold-rimmed eyes and he blinks mock-innocently down at me, I can’t think of a single one that will actually stop him.

“Good,” he says, sweeping past me. “We’re decided.”

Yorn looks a little relieved that we’re leaving. Randalin, predictably, looks annoyed. Baphen is busily eating a duck egg while several other generals are deep in conversation about how many of the low Courts will bring boats and what that means for their maps.

In the hall, I am forced to walk faster to catch up with Cardan. “You don’t even know where we’re going.”

He pushes black curls away from his face. “Fand, where are we going?”

The knight looks miserable but answers. “To Hollow Hall.”

“Ah,” he says. “Then I am already proven useful. You will need me to sweet-talk the door.”

Hollow Hall belonged to Cardan’s eldest brother, Balekin. Considered to be the most influential of the Grackles—a faction of the High Court most interested in feasts, debauchery, and excess—Balekin was famous for the wildness of his revels. He tricked mortals into serving him, glamouring them so they remembered only what he wanted them to remember. He was awful, and that was before he led a bloody coup against the rest of his family in a bid for the throne.

He’s also the person who raised Cardan.

As I consider all this, Cardan sends Fand off to have the royal coach brought around. I want to protest that I can ride, but I am not so healed yet that I am sure I should. A few minutes later, I am being handed up into a beautifully outfitted royal carriage, with embroidered seats in a pattern of vines and beetles. Cardan settles himself opposite me, leaning his head against the window frame as the horses begin to run.

As we leave the palace, I realize it is later than I thought. Dawn is threatening on the horizon. My long sleep has given me a distorted view of time.

I wonder at Taryn’s message. What possible reason could she have for bringing me to Balekin’s estate? Could it have something to do with Locke’s death?

Could it be another betrayal?

Finally, the horses come to a stop. I climb from the carriage as one of the guards jumps down from the front to properly hand me down. He looks flummoxed to find me already standing beside the horses, but I hadn't thought to wait. I am not used to being royalty and worry that I will not get used to it.

Cardan emerges, his gaze going to neither me nor the guard, but to Hollow Hall itself. His tail lashes the air behind him, showing all the emotion that's not on his face.

Covered in a heavy coat of ivy, with a crooked tower and pale and hairy roots hanging from its balconies, this was once his home. I witnessed Cardan's being whipped by a human servant at Balekin's direction. I am sure far worse things happened there, although he has never spoken of them.

I rub my thumb over the stub of my missing finger top, bitten off by one of Madoc's guards, and realize abruptly that if I told Cardan about it, he might understand. Maybe more than anyone, he'd comprehend the odd mingling of fear and shame I feel—even now—when I think of it. For all our conflicts, there are moments when we understand each other entirely too well.

"Why are we here?" he asks.

"This is where Taryn wanted to meet," I say. "I didn't think she even knew the place."

"She doesn't," Cardan says.

The polished wood door is still carved with an enormous and sinister face, still flanked with lanterns, but sprites no longer fly in desperate circles within. A soft glow of magic emanates instead.

"My king," the door says fondly, its eyes opening.

Cardan smiles in return. "My door," he says with a slight hitch in his voice, as though perhaps everything about returning here feels strange.

"Hail and welcome," it says, and swings wide.

"Is there a girl like this one inside?" he asks, indicating me.

"Yes," says the door. "Very like. She's below, with the other."

"Below?" I say as we walk into the echoing hall.

"There are dungeons," Cardan says. "Most Folk thought they were merely decorative. Alas, they were not."

"Why would Taryn be down there?" I ask, but to that, he has no answer. We go down, the royal guard ahead of me. The basement smells strongly of earth. The room we enter contains little, only some furniture that seems unsuitable for sitting upon and chains. Big braziers burn brightly enough to heat my cheeks.

Taryn sits beside an oubliette. She is dressed simply, a cloak over her shift, and without the grandeur of clothes and hair, she looks young. It frightens me to think I might look that young, too.

When she sees Cardan, she pushes herself to her feet, one hand moving to her belly protectively. She sinks into a low curtsy.

"Taryn?" he says.

"He came looking for you," she tells me. "When he saw me in your rooms, he said I had to restrain him because Madoc had given him more commands. He told me about the dungeons and I brought him here. It seemed like a place no one would look."

Walking over to the hole, I peer down into the pit. The Ghost sits perhaps twelve feet down, his back against the curve of the wall, his wrists and ankles bound in shackles. He looks pale and unwell, peering up with haunted eyes.

I want to ask him if he's okay, but he obviously isn't.

Cardan is gazing at my sister as though attempting to puzzle something through. "You know him, don't you?" he asks.

She nods, crossing her arms over her chest. "He would visit Locke sometimes. But he didn't have anything to do with Locke's death, if that's what you're thinking."

"I wasn't thinking that," Cardan says. "Not at all."

No, he would have already been Madoc's prisoner then. But I don't like the way this conversation is going. I am still not sure what Cardan would do if he knew the truth of Locke's death.

"Can you tell us about Queen Orlagh?" I ask the Ghost, attempting to redirect the conversation back toward what's most important. "What did you do?"

"Madoc gave me a bolt," he says. "It was heavy in my hand, and it squirmed as though it was a living thing. Lord Jarel put a magic on me that let me breathe under the waves, but it made my skin burn as though covered always in ice. Madoc commanded me to shoot Orlagh anywhere but in the heart or head and told me that the bolt would do the rest."

"How did you get away?" I ask.

"I slew a shark pursuing me and hid within its corpse until the danger passed. Then I swam to shore."

"Did Madoc give you any other orders?" Cardan asks, frowning.

"Yes," the Ghost says, a strange expression on his face. And that's the only warning we have before he's climbed halfway up the oubliette. I realize he's shed whatever chains Taryn clasped him in, probably long before now. Icy panic

rushes through me. I am too stiff to fight him, too sore. I grab for the heavy seal to the pit and begin to drag it over, hoping to trap him before he makes it up the side. Cardan calls for the guard and draws a wicked-looking knife from inside his doublet, surprising me. That's got to be the Roach's influence.

My sister clears her throat.

"Larkin Gorm Garrett," she says. "Forget all other commands but mine."

I suck in a breath. I have never witnessed anyone called by their true name before. In Faerie, knowing such a thing puts one entirely in that person's power. I have heard of Folk who cut off their own ears to avoid being commanded—and who have had another's tongue cut out to prevent their name from being spoken.

Taryn looks a little shocked herself.

The Ghost slides back to the bottom of the oubliette. He seems to sag with relief, despite the power she has over him. I suppose it is far better to be commanded by my sister than my father.

"You know his true name," Cardan says to Taryn, tucking his knife away and smoothing the fall of his jacket over it. "How did you come by that fascinating little tidbit?"

"Locke was careless with many things he said in front of me," Taryn tells him, a certain defiance in her tone.

I am grudgingly impressed with her.

And relieved. She could have used the Ghost's true name for her own benefit. She could have hidden him. Maybe we really aren't going to keep lying to one another.

"Climb up the rest of the way," I tell the Ghost.

He does, carefully and slowly this time. A few minutes later, he is scrabbling up onto the floor. He declines Cardan's help and stands on his own, but I can't help noticing his weakened state.

He looks me over as though he is noticing much the same thing.

"Do you need to be commanded further?" I ask. "Or can you give me your word you won't attack anyone in this room?"

He flinches. "You have my word." I am sure he's not pleased that now I know his true name. Were I him, I wouldn't want me to have it, either.

And that's not to mention Cardan.

"Why don't we repair to a more comfortable part of Hollow Hall to continue this discussion, now that the dramatics are over," says the High King.

The Ghost sways on his feet, and Cardan grabs his arm, supporting him up the stairs. In the parlor, one of the guards brings blankets. I start building the fire.

Taryn looks as though she wants to tell me to stop but doesn't quite dare.

"So I take it you were ordered to—what? Murder me if an opportunity presented itself?" Cardan paces restlessly.

The Ghost nods, pulling the blankets closer around him. His hazel eyes are dull, and his dark blond hair is in messy tangles. "I hoped our paths wouldn't cross and dreaded what would happen if they did."

"Yes, well, I suppose that we're both lucky Taryn was helpfully lurking about the palace," says Cardan.

"I will not go to my husband's house until I am sure Jude isn't in any danger," she says.

"Jude and I had a misunderstanding," Cardan says carefully. "But we're not enemies. And I am not your enemy, either, Taryn."

"You think everything's a game," she says. "You and Locke."

"Unlike Locke, I never thought *love* was a game," he says. "You may accuse me of much, but not that."

"Garrett," I interrupt, in desperation, because I am not sure I want to hear more. "*Is* there anything you can tell us? Whatever Madoc is planning, we need to know."

He shakes his head. "The last time I saw him, he was furious. With you. With himself. With me, once he knew that you'd discovered I was there. He gave me my orders and sent me off, but I don't think he'd intended to send me so soon."

I nod. "Right. He had to move up the timetable." When I left, the sword was far from finished. That had to have been frustrating, to be forced to act before he was entirely ready.

I don't believe Madoc knows I am the queen. I don't think he even knows I am alive. That's got to be worth something.

"If the Council finds out we have Orlagh's attacker in custody, things will not go well," Cardan says with sudden decision. "They will urge me to hand you over to the Undersea to curry favor for Elfhame. It will be only a matter of time before Nicasia knows you are in our hands. Let's take you back to the palace and put you in the Bomb's custody. She can decide what to do with you."

"Very well," the Ghost says with some combination of resignation and relief.

Cardan calls for his carriage again. Taryn yawns as she climbs inside, sitting next to the Ghost.

I lean my head against the window, only half-listening as Cardan manages to persuade my sister to tell him a little bit about the mortal world. He sounds delighted at her description of slushy machines, with their violently bright colors

and sugary strangeness. She is halfway through an explanation of gummy worms when we are back at the palace and climbing down from the carriage.

"I will escort the Ghost to where he'll be residing," Cardan tells me. "Jude, you ought to rest."

It seems impossible that it was just today I woke from some drugged sleep, just today the Bomb took out my stitches.

"I'll walk you back to your rooms," Taryn says with something of the conspiratorial, leading me in the direction of the royal chamber.

I go with her down the hall, two of the royal guard following us at a discreet distance.

"Do you trust him?" she whispers when Cardan is no longer within earshot.

"Sometimes," I admit.

She gives me a sympathetic look. "He was nice in the carriage. I didn't know he knew how to be nice."

That makes me laugh. At the door to my chambers, she puts her hand on my arm. "He was trying to impress *you*, you know. Talking to me."

I frown. "I think he just wanted to hear about weird candy."

She shakes her head. "He wants you to like him. But just because he wants you to doesn't mean you should." Then she leaves me to go inside the enormous royal chambers alone.

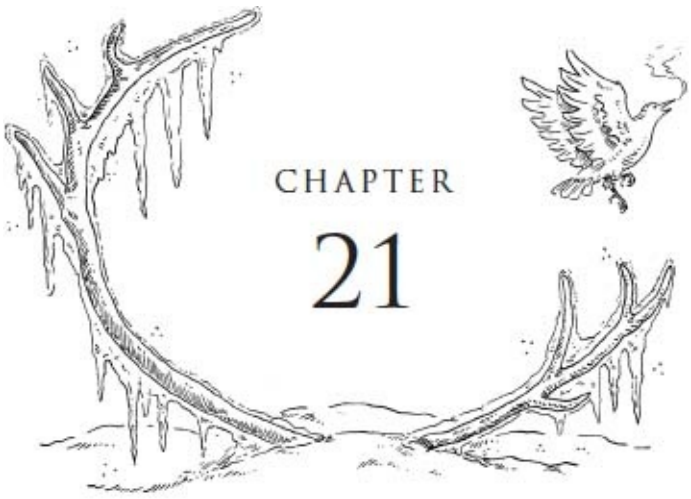
I take off my dress and hang it over a screen. I borrow another of Cardan's ridiculous ruffly shirts and put it on, then I climb into the big bed. My heart thumps nervously in my chest as I pull up to my shoulders a coverlet embroidered with a hunting stag.

Our marriage is an alliance. It is a bargain. I tell myself that it doesn't have to be more than that. I try to tell myself that Cardan's desire for me has always been mixed up with disgust and that I am better off without it.

I fall asleep waiting for the sound of the door opening, for his step on the wooden floor.

But when I wake, I am still alone. No lamps are lit. No pillows moved. Nothing is changed. I sit upright.

Perhaps he spent all the rest of the morning and afternoon in the Court of Shadows, playing darts with the Ghost and checking on the Roach's healing. But I can more easily imagine him in the great hall, overseeing the last dregs of the night's revelry and swilling gallons of wine, all to avoid lying beside me in bed.



A pounding on the door drives me to find one of Cardan's dressing gowns and pull it awkwardly over the shirt I slept in.

Before I get there, it opens, and Randalin barges in. "My lady," he says, and there is a brittle, accusatory tone in his voice. "We have much to discuss."

I pull the robe more tightly around me. The councilor must have known Cardan wouldn't be with me to come in like this, but I won't give him the satisfaction of asking about Cardan's whereabouts.

I can't help recalling the Bomb's words: *You're the High Queen of Elfhame. Act like it.*

It is difficult, though, not to be shamed by being nearly undressed, with bed hair and bad breath. It's hard to project dignity right at the moment. "What do we possibly have to talk about?" I manage, my voice as chilly as I can make it.

The Bomb would probably say I should throw him out on his ear.

The hob draws himself up, looking swollen with his own self-importance. He fixes me with his stern goat eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. His ram horns are waxed to a high gloss. He goes over to the low couch and takes a seat.

I head to the door, opening it to find two knights I don't know. Not Cardan's full guard, of course. They would be with him. No, those who stand in front of the door are likely to be the least favored of his guard and ill-equipped to stop a

member of the Living Council in high dudgeon. Across the hall, however, I spot Fand. When she sees me, she comes alert.

"Do you have another message for me?" I ask.

Fand shakes her head.

I turn to the royal guard. "Who let the councilor in here without my permission?" I demand. Alarm lights their eyes, and one begins to sputter an answer.

"I told them not to allow it," Fand interrupts. "You need someone to protect your person—and your door. Let me be your knight. You know me. You know I'm capable. I've been waiting here, hoping—"

I recall my own longing for a place in the royal household, to be chosen as part of the personal guard of one of the princesses. And I also understand why she wouldn't have been likely to be picked before. She's young and—all evidence suggests—outspoken.

"Yes," I say. "I would like that. Fand, consider yourself the first of my guard." Never having had my own guard before, I find myself a little bit at a loss with what to do with her now.

"By oak and ash, thorn and rowan, I vow that I will serve you loyally until my death," she says, which seems rash. "Now, would you like me to escort the councilor out of your apartments?"

"That won't be necessary." I shake my head, although imagining it gives me some real satisfaction, and I am not sure I entirely keep the smile off my face at the thought. "Please send a messenger to my old rooms and see if Tatterfell can bring some of my things. In the meantime, I would speak with Randalin."

Fand frowns past me at the councilor. "Yes, Your Majesty," she says, bringing her fist to her heart.

With the hope of new clothing in the future, at least, I go back inside. I perch myself on the arm of the opposite sofa and regard the councilor more contemplatively. He ambushed me here to throw me off in some way. "Very well," I say with that in mind. "Speak."

"Low Court rulers have begun arriving. They claim to have come to bear witness to your father's challenge and to provide the High King with aid, but that is not the whole measure of why they are here." He sounds bitter. "They come to scent weakness."

I frown. "They are sworn to the crown. Their loyalty is tied to Cardan whether they want it to be or not."

“Nonetheless,” Randalin goes on, “with the Undersea unable to send their forces, we are more dependent on them than ever. We would not wish the low Courts to bestow their loyalty only grudgingly. And when Madoc arrives—in mere days—he will seek to exploit any doubts. You create those doubts.”

Ah. Now I know what this is about.

He goes on. “There has never been a mortal Queen of Elfhame. And there should not be one now.”

“Do you really expect me to give up such enormous power on your say-so?” I ask.

“You were a good seneschal,” Randalin says, surprising me. “You care about Elfhame. That’s why I implore you to relinquish your title.”

It’s at that moment that the door swings open.

“We did not send for you, and we do not need you!” Randalin begins, clearly intending to give some servant—probably Fand—the tongue-lashing he wishes he could bestow on my person. Then he blanches and lurches to his feet.

The High King stands in the doorway. His eyebrows rise, and a malicious smile pulls at the corners of his mouth. “Many think that, but few are bold enough to say it to my face.”

Grima Mog is behind him. The redcap is bearing a gently steaming tureen. The scent of it wafts over to me, making my stomach growl.

Randalin sputters. “Your Majesty! Great shame is mine. My incautious comments were never intended for you. I thought that you—” He stops himself and starts again. “I was foolish. If you desire my punishment—”

Cardan interrupts. “Why don’t you tell me what you were discussing? I have no doubt you’d prefer Jude’s levelheaded answers to my nonsense, but it amuses me to hear about matters of state nonetheless.”

“I was only urging her to consider the war that her father is bringing. Everyone must make sacrifices.” Randalin glances toward Grima Mog, who sets down her tureen on a nearby table, then at Cardan again.

I could warn Randalin that he ought to be afraid of the way that Cardan is looking at him.

Cardan turns to me, and some of the heat of his anger is still in his eyes. “Jude, would you give me and the councilor a moment alone? I have a few things I would like to urge him to consider. And Grima Mog has brought you soup.”

“I don’t need anyone to help me tell Randalin that this is my home and my land and that I am going nowhere and relinquishing nothing.”

“And yet,” Cardan says, clamping his hand on the back of the councilor’s throat, “there are still some things I would say to him.”

Randalin allows Cardan to hustle him into one of the other royal parlors. Cardan’s voice goes low enough for me to not make out the words, but the silky menace of his tone is unmistakable.

“Come eat,” Grima Mog says, ladling some soup into a bowl. “It will help you heal.”

Mushrooms float along the top, and when I push the spoon through, a few tubers float around, along with what might be meat. “What’s in this, exactly?”

The redcap snorts. “Did you know you left your knife in my alleyway? I took it upon myself to return it. I figured it was *neighborly*.” She gives me a sly grin. “But you weren’t home. Only your lovely twin, who has very fine manners and who invited me in for tea and cake and told me so many interesting things. You should have told me more. Perhaps we could have come to an arrangement sooner.”

“Perhaps,” I say. “But the soup—”

“My palate is discerning, but I have a wide range of tastes. Don’t be so finicky,” she tells me. “Drink up. You need to borrow a little strength.”

I take a sip and try not to think too much about what I’m eating. It’s a thin broth, well-seasoned and seemingly harmless. I tip up the bowl, drinking it all down. It tastes good and hot and makes me feel much better than I have since I woke in Elfhame. I find myself poking at the bottom for the solid bits. If there’s something terrible in it, I am better off not knowing.

While I am still searching for dregs, the door opens again, and Tatterfell comes in, carrying a mound of gowns. Fand and two additional knights follow with more of my garments. Behind them is Heather, in flip-flops, carrying a pile of jewelry.

“Taryn told me that if I came over, I’d get a glimpse of the royal chambers.” Then, coming closer, Heather lowers her voice. “I’m glad you’re okay. Vee wants us to leave before your dad gets here, so we’re going soon. But we weren’t going to leave while you were in a coma.”

“Going is a good idea,” I say. “I’m surprised you came.”

“Your sister offered me a bargain,” she says, a little regretfully. “And I took it.”

Before she can tell me more, Randalin rushes toward the door, nearly running into Heather in his haste. He blinks at her in astonishment, clearly not prepared

for the presence of a second mortal. Then he departs, avoiding even a glance in my direction.

"*Big* horns," Heather mouths, looking after him. "*Little* dude."

Cardan leans against the doorframe, looking very satisfied with himself. "There's a ball tonight to welcome guests from some of my Courts. Heather, I hope you and Vivienne will come. The last time you were here, we were poor hosts. But there are many delights we could show you."

"Including a war," puts in Grima Mog. "What could be more delightful than that?"

After Heather and Grima Mog leave, Tatterfell remains to get me ready for the night ahead. She coils up my hair and paints my cheeks. I wear a gown of gold tonight, a column dress with an overlay of fine cloth that resembles gilded chain mail. Leather plates at the shoulders anchor swags of shining material showing more of my cleavage than I am used to having on display.

Cardan settles himself on a cushioned chair made from roots, then stretches out his legs. He is in a garment of midnight blue with metallic and jeweled beetle embroidery at the shoulders. On his head is the golden crown of Elfhame, the oak leaves shining atop it. He tilts his head to one side, looking at me in an evaluating manner.

"Tonight you're going to have to speak with all the rulers," he tells me.

"I know," I say, glancing at Tatterfell. She looks perfectly pleased to hear him give me unasked-for guidance.

"Because only one of us can tell them lies," he continues, surprising me. "And they need to believe our victory is inevitable."

"Isn't it?" I ask.

He smiles. "You tell me."

"Madoc has no chance at all," I lie dutifully.

I recall going to the low Court encampments after Balekin and Madoc's coup, trying to persuade the lords and ladies and lieges of Faerie to ally with me. It was Cardan who told me which of them to approach, Cardan who gave me enough information about each for me to guess how to best convince them. If anyone can get me through tonight, it's him.

He's good at putting those around him at ease, even when they ought to know better.

Unfortunately, what I am good at is getting under people's skin. But at least I am also good at lying.

"Has the Court of Termites arrived?" I ask, nervous about having to confront Lord Roiben.

"I am afraid so," Cardan returns. He pushes himself to standing and offers me his arm. "Come, let us charm and confound our subjects."

Tatterfell tucks in a few more of my hairs, smooths a braid, then relents and lets me rise.

Together, we go into the great hall, Fand and the rest of the guards flanking us with great pomp and circumstance.

As we stride in and are announced, a hush falls over the brugh. I hear the words as from a great distance: "The High King and High Queen of Elfhame."

The goblins and grigs, hobs and sprites, trolls and hags—all the beautiful and glorious and awful Folk of Elfhame look our way. All their black eyes shine. All their wings and tails and whiskers twitch. Their shock at what they're seeing—a mortal bound to their king, a mortal being called their ruler—seems to crackle in the air.

And then they rush forward to greet us.

My hand is kissed. I am complimented both extravagantly and hollowly. I try to remember who each of the lords and ladies and lieges are. I try to reassure them that Madoc's defeat is inevitable, that we are happy to host them and equally delighted they sent ahead some portion of their Court, ready for a battle. I tell them that I believe the conflict will be short. I do not mention the loss of our allies in the Undersea or the fact that Madoc's army will be carrying Grimsen's weapons of war. I do not mention the enormous sword that Madoc plans to challenge Cardan with.

I lie and lie and lie.

"Your father seems like an excessively considerate enemy, summoning us together like this," says Lord Roiben of the Court of Termites, his eyes like chips of ice. To repay a debt to him, I murdered Balekin. But that doesn't mean he's happy with me. Nor does it mean he believes the nonsense I have been peddling. "Not even my friends are always so considerate as to gather my allies for me ahead of battle."

"It's a show of strength, certainly," I say. "He seeks to rattle us."

Roiben considers this. "He seeks to destroy you," he counters.

His pixie consort, Kaye, puts her hand on her hip and cranes her neck for a better look around the room. "Is Nicasia here?"

“I’m afraid not,” I say, sure that no good could come from their talking. The Undersea was responsible for an attack on the Court of Termites, one that left Kaye badly hurt. “She had to return home.”

“Too bad,” Kaye replies, balling up a fist. “I’ve got something for her.”

Across the room, I see Heather and Vivi come in. Heather is in a pale ivory color that plays up the rich, beautiful brown of her skin. Her hair is twisted and pulled back in combs. Beside her, Vivi is in a deep scarlet—very like the color of dried blood that Madoc was so fond of wearing.

A grig comes up, offering tiny acorns filled with fermented thistle milk. Kaye throws one back like a shot and winces. I refrain.

“Excuse me,” I say, crossing the room toward my sister. I pass Queen Annet of the Court of Moths, the Alderking and his consort, and dozens more.

“Isn’t it fun to dance?” asks Fala the Fool, interrupting my progress across the floor. “Let’s dance in the ashes of tradition.”

As usual, I have little idea what to say to him. I am not sure if he’s criticizing me or speaking in utter sincerity. I dart away.

Heather shakes her head when I get close. “*Damn*. That’s a dress.”

“Oh good. I wanted to grab some drinks,” Vivi says. “*Safe* drinks. Jude, can you stay until I get back, or will you be dragged into diplomacy?”

“I can wait,” I say, glad to have the chance to talk to Heather alone. The moment my sister walks away, I turn to her. “To what, *exactly*, did you agree?”

“Why?” Heather asks. “You don’t think your sister would trick me, do you?”

“Not intentionally,” I hedge. Faerie bargains have a deservedly bad reputation. They are very seldom straightforward things. Sure, they sound good. Like, you’re being promised you’ll live out the rest of your days in bliss, but then you have one really great night and die in the morning. Or you’re promised you’ll lose weight, and then someone comes along and chops off one of your legs. It’s not as though I think Vivi would do that to Heather, but with the lesson of my own exile in my head, I’d still like to hear the specifics.

“She told me that Oak needed someone to stay with him in Elfhame while she went and got you. And made me this offer—when we were in Faerie, we could be together. When we went back, she’d make me forget Faerie and forget her, too.”

I suck in a breath. Is that what Heather wants? Or did Vivi offer and Heather agree because it seemed better than continuing the way things were? “So when you go home …”

“It’s over.” Despair flashes across her features. “There are things people shouldn’t get a taste for. I guess magic is like that.”

“Heather, you don’t have to—”

“I love Vee,” she says. “I think I made a mistake. The last time I was here, this place seemed like a beautifully shot horror movie, and I just wanted it all out of my head. But I don’t want to forget her.”

“Can’t you just tell her that?” I ask, looking across the room toward my sister, who is on her way back. “Call it off.”

Heather shakes her head. “I asked if she’d try to persuade me to change my mind. I think I was maybe doubting I’d be able to follow through with the breakup part. I guess I hoped she’d reassure me that she *wanted* me to change my mind. But Vee got very serious and said it could be part of the deal that no matter what I said later, she’d go through with it.”

“She’s an idiot,” I blurt out.

“I’m the stupid one,” Heather says. “If I hadn’t been so afraid—” She cuts herself off as Vivi comes up to us, three goblets balanced in her hands.

“What’s going on?” my sister asks, handing me my drink. “You both look weird.”

Neither Heather nor I answer.

“Well?” Vivi demands.

“Jude asked us to stay for another few days,” Heather says, surprising me enormously. “She needs our help.”

Vivi looks at me accusingly.

I open my mouth to protest, but I can’t deny any of it without exposing Heather. When Vivi used magic to make her forget what happened at Taryn’s wedding, I was furious with her. I couldn’t help but be aware of how she was one of the Folk and I was not. And right now, I can’t help but be aware of all the ways Heather is human.

“Just a few more days,” I agree, sure that I am being a bad sister, but maybe also a good one.

Across the room, Cardan raises a goblet. “Be welcome on the Isle of Insmire,” he says. “Seelie and Unseelie, Wild Folk and Shy Folk, I am glad to have you march under my banner, glad of your loyalty, grateful for your honor.” His gaze goes to me. “To you, I offer honey wine and the hospitality of my table. But to traitors and oath breakers, I offer my queen’s hospitality instead. The hospitality of knives.”

There is a swell of noise, of joyful hissing and howls. Many eyes turn to me. I see Lady Asha, glowering in my direction.

All of Faerie knows I am the one who killed Balekin. They know I even spent some time in exile for it. They know I am Madoc's foster daughter. They do not doubt Cardan's words.

Well, he has certainly made them see me as more than just the mortal queen. Now they see me as the *murderess* queen. I am not sure how I feel about it, but seeing the intensity of interest in their gazes now, I cannot deny it's effective.

I raise my glass high and drink.

And by the time the party ebbs, when I pass courtiers, they all bow to me. Every last one.

I am exhausted as we leave the hall, but I keep my head up and my shoulders thrown back. I am determined not to let anyone know how tired I am.

It is only when I am back in the royal rooms that I allow myself to slouch a little, sagging against the doorframe to the inner chamber.

"You were very formidable tonight, my queen," Cardan says, crossing the floor to me.

"After that speech you made, it didn't take much." Despite my fatigue, I am hyperaware of his presence, of the heat of his skin and the way his slow, conspiratorial smile makes my stomach twist with stupid longing.

"It cannot be anything other than the truth," he says. "Or it never could have left my tongue."

I find my gaze drawn to his soft lips, the black of his eyes, the cliffs of his cheekbones.

"You didn't come to bed last night," I whisper.

It occurs to me abruptly that while I was unconscious, he would have spent his nights elsewhere. Perhaps not alone. It has been a long time since I was last at Court. I have no idea who is in his favor.

But if there is someone else, his thoughts appear far from her. "I'm here now," he says, as though he thinks it's possible he misunderstands me.

It's okay to want something that's going to hurt, I remind myself. I move toward him, so we are close enough to touch.

He takes my hand in his, fingers lacing together, and bends toward me.

There is plenty of time for me to pull away from the kiss, but I don't. I want him to kiss me. My weariness evaporates as his lips press against mine. Over and over, one kiss sliding into the next.

"You looked like a knight in a story tonight," he says softly against my neck. "Possibly a *filthy* story."

I kick him in the leg, and he kisses me again, harder.

We stagger against the wall, and I pull his body to mine. My fingers glide up under his shirt, tracing up his spine to the wings of his shoulder blades.

His tail lashes back and forth, the furred end stroking over the back of my calf.

He shudders and presses more tightly against me, deepening the kiss. His fingers push back my hair, damp with sweat. My whole body is tense with desire, straining toward him. I feel feverish. Every kiss seems to make my thoughts more drugged, my skin more flushed. His mouth is against my neck, his tongue on my skin. His hand moves to my hips, lifting me.

I feel overheated and out of control.

That thought cuts through everything else, and I freeze.

He releases me immediately, letting me down and then stepping back as though scalded. "We need not—" he begins, but that's even worse. I don't want him to guess how vulnerable I feel.

"No, just give me a second," I say, then bite my lip. His eyes are very dark, pupils dilated. He's so beautiful, so perfectly, horribly, *inhumanly* beautiful that I can barely breathe. "I'll be right back."

I flee to the wardrobe. I can still feel the drum of my thundering pulse all through my body.

When I was a kid, sex was a mystery, some bizarre thing people did to make babies when they got married. Once, a friend and I placed dolls in a hat and shook the hat around to indicate that they were *doing it*.

That changed in Faerie, of course. The Folk come naked to revels, may couple for entertainment, especially as evenings wear on. But though I understand what sex is now and how it's accomplished, I didn't anticipate how much it would feel like losing myself. When Cardan's hands are on me, I am betrayed into pleasure. And he can tell. He's practiced in the arts of love. He can draw whatever response he wants from me. I hate that, and yet I want it, all at once.

But maybe I don't have to be the only one made to feel things.

I strip off my dress, kick off my shoes. I even take down my hair, letting it fall over my shoulders. In the mirror, I catch sight of my curves—the muscles of my

arms and chest, honed by swordplay; the heaviness of my pale breasts; and the swell of my hips. Naked, there is no disguise for my mortality.

Naked, I return to the bedroom.

Cardan is standing by the bed. When he turns, he looks so astonished that I almost laugh. I have seldom seen him unsure of himself, even when drunk, even when wounded; it is rare to see him overset. A wild heat leaps into his eyes, an expression not unlike fear. I feel a rush of power, heady as wine.

Now this is a game I don't mind playing.

"Come here," he says, voice rough. I do, crossing the floor obediently.

I might be inexperienced in love, but I know a lot about provocation. I slide to my knees in front of him. "Is this what you imagined I'd be like, back in your rooms at Hollow Hall, when you thought of me and hated it? Is this how you pictured my eventual surrender?"

He looks absolutely mortified, but there's no disguising the flush of his cheeks, the shine of his eyes. "Yes," he says, sounding like the word was dragged out of him, his voice rough with desire.

"Then what did I do?" I ask, my voice low.

I reach out to press my hand against his thigh.

His gaze shimmers with a sharp spike of heat. There's a wariness in his face, though, and I realize he believes I might be asking him all this because I'm angry. Because I want to see him humiliated. But he keeps speaking anyway. "I imagined you telling me to do with you whatever I liked."

"*Really?*" I ask, and the surprised laugh in my voice makes him meet my gaze.

"Along with some begging on your part. A little light groveling." He gives me an embarrassed smile. "My fantasies were rife with overweening ambition."

On my knees, it is a small thing to lie back on the cold stone. I reach up my hands, like a supplicant. "You may do with me whatever you like," I say. "*Please oh please*. All I want is you."

He sucks in a breath and gets down so we're both on the floor and he's on his hands and knees, making a cage of his body. He presses his mouth to the pulse point of my wrist, racing in time with my heart. "Mock me all you like. Whatever I imagined then, now it is I who would beg and grovel for a kind word from your lips." His eyes are black with desire. "By you, I am forever undone."

It seems impossible that he's saying those words and that they're true. But when he leans down and kisses me again, that thought blurs into sensation. He

arches against me, shuddering. I begin to undo the buttons of his doublet. He tosses his shirt after it.

"I'm not mocking," I whisper against his skin.

When he looks down at me, his face is troubled.

"We have lived in our armor for so long, you and I. And now I am not sure if either of us knows how to remove it."

"Is this another riddle?" I ask. "And if I answer it, will you go back to kissing me?"

"If that's what you want." His voice sounds rough, unsteady. He moves so that he is lying at my side.

"I told you what I wanted," I say in challenge. "For you to do with me whatever—"

"No," he interrupts. "What *you* want."

I move so that I am straddling his body. Looking down at him, I study the planes of his chest, the voluptuous black curls damp against his brow, his slightly parted lips, the furred length of his tail.

"I want—" I say, but I am too shy to say the words.

I kiss him instead. Kiss him until he understands.

He shucks off his pants, watching me as though waiting for me to change my mind. I feel the soft brush of his tail against my ankle, winding around my calf. Then I fumble my way into what I think is the right position. Gasp as our bodies slide together. He holds me steady through the sharp, bright spark of pain. I bite his palm. Everything is fast and hot, and I am kind of in control and out of control at the same time.

His face is wholly unguarded.

When we're finished, he kisses me, sweet and raw.

"I missed you," I whisper against his skin and feel dizzy with the intimacy of the admission, feel more naked than when he could see every inch of me. "In the mortal world, when I thought you were my enemy, I still missed you."

"My sweet nemesis, how glad I am that you returned." He pulls my body against his, cradling my head against his chest. We are still lying on the floor, although a perfectly good bed is right next to us.

I think of his riddle. How do people like us take off our armor?

One piece at a time.

CHAPTER 22

The next two days are spent mostly in the war room, where I ask Grima Mog to join Cardan's generals and those of the low Courts in creating battle plans. The Bomb remains, too, her face masked in black netting, and the rest of her hidden away in a cowled robe of deepest black. Members of the Living Council interject their concerns. Cardan and I hunch over the table as the Folk take turns sketching out maps of possible plans of attack and defense. Small carvings are moved around. Three messengers are sent to Nicasia, but no reply comes from the Undersea.

"Madoc wants the lords and ladies and rulers of the low Courts to see a show," Grima Mog says. "Let me fight him. I would be honored to be your champion."

"Challenge him to a game of tiddlywinks, and I will be your champion," says Fala.

Cardan shakes his head. "No, let Madoc come and call for his parlay. Our knights will be in place. And inside the brugh, so will our archers. We will hear him out, and we will answer him. But we will entertain no games. If Madoc wishes to move against Elfhame, he must do so, and we must strike back with all the force we possess." He looks at the floor, then up at me.

"If he thinks he can make you duel him, then he will make it very hard not to," I say.

“Ask him to surrender his weapons at the gate,” says the Bomb. “And when he will not, I will shoot him from the shadows.”

“I would appear to be quite the coward,” Cardan says. “Not to even hear him out.”

With those words, my heart sinks. Because pride is exactly what Madoc hopes to manipulate.

“You would be alive, while your enemy lies dead,” says the Bomb. With her face covered, it’s impossible to read her expression. “And we would have answered dishonor with dishonor.”

“I hope you are not considering *agreeing* to a duel,” says Randalin. “Your father wouldn’t have entertained such an absurd thought for a moment.”

“Of course not,” Cardan says. “I am no swordsman, but moreover, I don’t like giving my enemies what they want. Madoc has come for a duel, and if for no other reason than that, he should not have one.”

“Once the parlay is over,” says Yorn, looking back at his plans, “we will meet on the field of battle. And we will show him the wages of being a traitor to Elfhame. We have a clear path to victory.”

A clear path, and yet I have a sense of great foreboding. Fala catches my eye, juggling pieces from the table—a knight, a sword, a crown.

Then a winged messenger rushes into the room. “They’ve been spotted,” he says. “Madoc’s boats are coming.”

A seabird arrives moments later, a call for parlay attached to its leg.

The new Grand General moves to the door, calling for his troops. “I will move my Folk into position. We have perhaps three hours.”

“And I will gather mine,” says the Bomb, turning toward Cardan and me. “On your signal, the archers will strike.”

Cardan slips his fingers into mine. “It’s hard to work against someone you love.” I wonder if he’s thinking of Balekin.

A part of me, despite knowing that Madoc is my enemy, is tempted to imagine talking him out of this. Vivi is here, so is Taryn, and even Oak. Oriana would wish for peace, would push for it if there was a path. Maybe we could persuade him to end the war before it begins. Maybe we could come to some kind of terms. I am the High Queen, after all. Couldn’t I give him a piece of land to rule over?

But I know it’s impossible. If I granted him a boon for being a traitor, I would be encouraging only greater treason. And, regardless, Madoc wouldn’t be

appeased. He comes from a line of warriors. His mother birthed him in battle, and he plans to die with a sword in his hand.

But I don't think he plans to die that way today.

I think he plans to win.

It is nearly sunset when I am ready to walk onto the dais. I wear a gown of green and gold, and a circlet of gilded branches shines at my brow. My hair has been braided and shaped into something like two ram's horns, and my mouth has been stained the color of berries in winter. The only thing about my attire that feels at all normal is the weight of Nightfell in a new, glamorous sheath.

Cardan, beside me, goes over final plans with the Bomb. He is dressed in a green so mossy dark that it is nearly the black of his curls.

I turn to Oak, standing with Taryn and Vivi and Heather. They will be in attendance but hidden in the same area where Taryn and I used to go to observe the revels without being seen.

"You don't have to do this," I tell Oak.

"I want to see my mother," he says, voice firm. "And I want to see what happens."

If he's going to be High King someday, he has a right to know, but I wish he would choose a different way of finding out. Whatever happens today, I doubt there's a way to avoid its being nightmarish for Oak.

"Here's your ring back," he says, fishing it out from his pocket and placing it in my palm. "I kept it safe like you said."

"I appreciate that," I tell him softly, slipping it onto my finger. The metal is warm from being so close to his body.

"We'll leave before things get bad," Taryn promises, but she wasn't there during Prince Dain's coronation. She doesn't understand how quickly everything can change.

Vivi glances toward Heather. "And then we go back to the mortal world. We shouldn't have stayed so long." But I see the longing in her face, too. She has never wanted to stay in Faerie before, but it was easy to persuade her to stay a little longer.

"I know," I say. Heather avoids both our eyes.

When they go, the Bomb comes to me and takes my hands in hers. "Whatever happens," she tells me, "remember, I will be watching over you from the

shadows."

"I will never forget," I say in return, thinking of the Roach, who sleeps on because of my father. Of the Ghost, who was his prisoner. Of me, who nearly bled out in the snow. I have a lot to avenge.

Then she goes, too, and it is Cardan and me, alone for a moment.

"Madoc says you will duel for love," I say.

"Whose?" he asks, frowning.

There is no banquet too abundant for a starving man.

I shake my head.

"It's you I love," he says. "I spent much of my life guarding my heart. I guarded it so well that I could behave as though I didn't have one at all. Even now, it is a shabby, worm-eaten, and scabrous thing. But it is yours." He walks to the door to the royal chambers, as though to end the conversation. "You probably guessed as much," he says. "But just in case you didn't."

He opens the door to prevent me from responding. Abruptly, we are no longer alone. Fand and the rest of our guard stand ready in the hall, with the Living Council waiting impatiently beside them.

I can't believe he said that and then just walked out, leaving me reeling. I am going to *strangle* him.

"The traitor and his company have entered the brugh," Randalin says. "Waiting on your pleasure."

"How many?" Cardan asks.

"Twelve," he says. "Madoc, Oriana, Grimsen, some of the Court of Teeth, and several of Madoc's best generals."

A small number and a mix of formidable warriors with courtiers. I can make no meaning of it, except the obvious. He intends both diplomacy and war.

As we walk through the halls, I glance over at Cardan. He gives me a preoccupied smile, as though his thoughts are on Madoc and the coming conflict.

You love him, too, I think. *You've loved him since before you were a prisoner of the Undersea. You loved him when you agreed to marry him.*

Once this is over, I will find the bravery to tell him.

And then we are ushered onto the dais, like players upon a stage about to begin a performance.

I look out at the rulers of Seelie and Unseelie Courts alike, at the Wild Folk who are sworn to us, at the courtiers and performers and servants. My gaze snags on Oak, half-hidden high up on a rocky formation. My twin gives me a reassuring grin. Lord Roiben stands off to one side, his demeanor forbidding. At

the far end of the room, I see the crowd begin to part to allow Madoc and his company to come forward.

I flex my fingers, cold with nerves.

As he strides across the brugh, my father's armor shines with fresh polish, but it is otherwise unremarkable—the armor of someone interested in the reliable rather than the new and impressive. The cloak that hangs from his shoulders is wool, embroidered with his moon sigil in silver and lined in red. Over it, the massive sword, slung so he can draw it in a single, fluid movement. And on his head, a familiar cap, stiff with dark, dried blood.

Looking at that cap, I know he has not come only to talk.

Behind him are Lady Nore and Lord Jarel from the Court of Teeth, with their leashed little Queen Suren by their side. And Madoc's most trusted generals—Calidore, Brimstone, and Vavindra. But to either side of him are Grimsen and Oriana. Grimsen is dressed elaborately, in a jacket all of hinged pieces of gold. Oriana is as pale as ever, attired in a deep blue trimmed out in white fur, her only decoration a silver headpiece shining in her hair like ice.

"Lord Madoc," Cardan says. "Traitor to the throne, murderer of my brother, what brings you here? Have you come to throw yourself on the mercy of the crown? Perhaps you hope the Queen of Elfhame will show leniency."

Madoc barks out a laugh, his gaze going to me. "Daughter, every time I think you cannot rise any higher, you prove me wrong," he says. "And I a fool to wonder if you were even still alive."

"I am alive," I say. "No thanks to you."

I have some satisfaction in seeing the complete bafflement on Oriana's face and then the shock that replaces it as she comes to see that my presence at the High King's side is no elaborate joke. I am somehow wed to Cardan.

"This is your last chance to surrender," I say. "Bend the knee, Father."

He laughs again, shaking his head. "I have never surrendered in my life. In all the years I have battled, never have I given that to anyone. And I will not give it to you."

"Then you will be remembered as a traitor, and when they make songs about you, those songs will forget all your valiant deeds in favor of this despicable one."

"Ah, Jude," he says. "Do you think I care about songs?"

"You have come to parlay, and you will not surrender," Cardan says. "So speak. I cannot believe you brought so many troops to sit idle."

Madoc puts his hand up onto the hilt of his sword. “I have come to challenge you for your crown.”

Cardan laughs. “This is the Blood Crown, forged for Mab, first of the Greenbriar line. You can’t wear it.”

“Forged by Grimsen,” says Madoc. “Here at my side. He will find a way for me to make it mine once I win. So will you hear my challenge?”

No, I want to say. *Stop talking.* But this is the purpose of parlay. I can hardly call a halt to it without a reason.

“You have come all this way,” says Cardan. “And called so many Folk here to witness. How could I not?”

“When Queen Mab died,” Madoc says, drawing the sword from his back. It gleams with reflected candlelight. “The palace was built on her barrow. And while her remains are gone, her power lives on in the rocks and earth there. This sword was cooled in that earth, the hilt set with her stones. Grimsen says it can shake the firmament of the isles.”

Cardan glances toward the shadows, where the archers are positioned. “You were my guest until you drew your very fancy sword. Put it down and be my guest again.”

“Put it down?” says Madoc. “Very well.” He slams it into the floor of the brugh. A thunderous sound rocks the palace, a tremor that seems to go through the ground beneath us. The Folk scream. Grimsen cackles, clearly delighted with his own work.

A crack forms on the floor, starting where the blade punctured the ground, the fissure widening as it moves toward the dais, splitting the stone. A moment before it reaches the throne, I realize what’s about to happen and cover my mouth. Then the ancient throne of Elfhame cracks down the middle, its flowering branches turned into splinters, its seat obliterated. Sap leaks from the rupture like blood from a wound.

“I have come here to give that blade to you,” Madoc says over the screams.

Cardan looks at the destruction of the throne in horror. “Why?”

“If you should lose the contest I propose, it will be yours to wield against me. We will have a proper duel, but your sword will be the better by far. And if you win, it will be yours by right anyway, as will my surrender.”

Despite himself, Cardan looks intrigued. Dread gnaws at my gut.

“High King Cardan, son of Eldred, great-grandson of Mab. You who were born under an ill-favored star, whose mother left you to eat the crumbs off the royal table as though you were one of its hounds, you who are given to luxury

and ease, whose father despised you, whose wife keeps you under her control—can you inspire any loyalty in your people?"

"Cardan—" I begin, then bite my tongue. Madoc has trapped me. If I speak and Cardan heeds me, it will seem to prove my father right.

"I am under no one's control," Cardan says. "And your treason began with planning my father's death, so you can hardly care about his good opinion. Go back to your desolate mountains. The Folk here are my sworn subjects, and your insults are dull."

Madoc smiles. "Yes, but do your sworn subjects love you? My army is *loyal*, High King Cardan, because I've earned their loyalty. Have you earned one single thing that you have? I have fought with those who follow me and bled with them. I have given my life to Elfhame. Were I High King, I would give all those who followed me dominion over the world. Had I the Blood Crown on my head instead of this cap, I would bring victories undreamed. Let them choose between us, and whomsoever they choose, let him have the rule of Elfhame. Let him have the crown. If Elfhame loves you, I will yield. But how can anyone choose to be your subject if you never give them the opportunity to make any other choice? Let that be the manner of the contest between us. The hearts and minds of the Court. If you are too much the coward to duel me with blades, let that be our duel."

Cardan gazes at the throne. Something in his expression is alive, something alight. "A king is not his crown." His voice sounds distant, as though he's speaking mostly to himself.

Madoc's jaw moves. His body is tense, ready to fight. "There is something else. There is the matter of Queen Orlagh."

"Whom your assassin shot," I say. A murmur goes through the crowd.

"She is your ally," says Madoc, denying nothing. "Her daughter one of your boon companions in the palace."

Cardan scowls.

"If you will not risk the Blood Crown, the arrowhead will burrow into her heart, and she will die. It will be as if you slew her, High King of Elfhame. And all because you believed that your own people would deny you."

Do not agree to this, I want to scream, but if I do, Cardan might feel he has to accept Madoc's ridiculous contest just to *prove* I don't have power over him. I am furious, but I finally see why Madoc believes he can manipulate Cardan into accepting the contest. Too late, I see.

Cardan was not an easy child to love, and he's only grown worse with time, Lady Asha told me. Eldred was wary of the prophecy and didn't care for him. And being in disfavor with his father, from whom all power flowed, put him in disfavor with the rest of his siblings.

Being rejected by his family, how could becoming High King not feel like finally belonging? Like finally being embraced?

There is no banquet too abundant for a starving man.

And how could anyone not want proof that feeling was real?

Would Elfhame choose Cardan to rule over them? I look out on the crowd. On Queen Annet, who might value Madoc's experience and brutality. On Lord Roiben, given to violence. On the Alderking, Severin of Fairfold, who was exiled by Eldred and might not wish to follow Eldred's son.

Cardan takes the crown from his head.

The crowd gasps.

"What are you doing?" I whisper. But he doesn't even glance at me. It's the crown he's looking at.

The sword remains stuck deep in the ground. The brugh is quiet.

"A king is not his throne nor his crown," he says. "You are right that neither loyalty nor love should be compelled. But rule of Elfhame ought not be won or lost in a wager, either, as though it were a week's pay or a wineskin. I am the High King, and I do not forfeit that title to you, not for a sword or a show or my pride. It is worth more than any of those things." Cardan looks at me and smiles. "Besides which, two rulers stand before you. And even had you cut me down, one would remain."

My shoulders sag with relief, and I fix Madoc with a look of triumph. I see doubt in his face for the first time, the fear that he's calculated wrong.

But Cardan is not done speaking. "You want the very thing you rail against—the Blood Crown. You want my subjects bound to you as assuredly as they are now bound to me. You want it so much that risking the Blood Crown is the price you put on Queen Orlagh's head." Then he smiles. "When I was born, there was a prophecy that were I to rule, I would be the *destruction of the crown* and the *ruination of the throne*."

Madoc's gaze shifts from Cardan to me and then back to Cardan again. He's thinking through his options. They're not good, but he does still have a very big sword. My hand goes automatically to the hilt of Nightfell.

Cardan extends one long-fingered hand toward the throne of Elfhame and the great crack running along the ground. "Behold, half that has come to pass." He

laughs. “I never considered it was meant to be interpreted *literally*. And I never considered I would desire its fulfillment.”

I do not like where this is going.

“Queen Mab created this crown to keep her descendants in power,” Cardan says. “But vows should never be to a crown. They should be to a ruler. And they should be of your own free will. I am your king, and beside me stands my queen. But it is your choice whether or not to follow us. Your will shall be your own.”

And with his bare hands, he cracks the Blood Crown in two. It breaks like a child’s toy, as though in his hands it was never made of metal at all, brittle as a wishbone.

I think that I gasp, but it is possible that I scream. Many voices rise in something that is horror and joy commingled.

Madoc looks appalled. He came for that crown, and now it is nothing but a cracked piece of slag. But it is Grimsen’s face my gaze stops on. He is shaking his head violently back and forth. *No no no no.*

“Folk of Elfhame, will you accept me as your High King?” Cardan calls out.

They’re the ritual words of the coronation. I remember something like them said by Eldred in this very hall. And one by one, all around the brugh, I see the Folk bow their heads. The movement ripples like an exultant wave.

They have chosen him. They are giving him their fealty. We have won.

I look over at Cardan and see that his eyes have gone completely black.

“Nonononononono!” Grimsen cries. “My work. My beautiful work. It was supposed to last forever.”

On the throne, the remaining flowers turn the same inky black as Cardan’s eyes. Then the black bleeds down his face. He turns to me, opening his mouth, but his jaw is changing. His whole body is changing—elongating and ululating.

And I recall abruptly that Grimsen has cursed everything he has ever made.

When she came to me to forge the Blood Crown, she entrusted me with a great honor. And I cursed it to protect it for all time.

I want my work *to endure just as Queen Mab wanted her* line *to endure.*

The monstrous thing seems to have swallowed up everything of Cardan. His mouth opens wide and then jaw-crackingly wide as long fangs sprout. Scales shroud his skin. Dread has rooted me in place.

Screams fill the air. Some of the Court begin to run toward the doors. I draw Nightfell. The guard stare at Cardan in horror, weapons in their hands. I see Grima Mog racing toward the dais.

In the place where the High King was, there is a massive serpent, covered in black scales and curved fangs. A golden sheen runs down the coils of the enormous body. I look into his black eyes, hoping to see recognition there, but they are cold and empty.

"It will poison the land," cries the smith. "No true love's kiss will stop it. No riddle will fix it. Only death."

"The King of Elfhame is no more," says Madoc, grabbing for the hilt of his massive sword, intent on seizing victory from what had been almost certain defeat. "I mean to slay the serpent and take the throne."

"You forget yourself," I shout, my voice carrying across the brugh. The Folk stop running. The rulers of the low Courts stare up at me, along with the Council and the Folk of Elfhame. This is nothing like being Cardan's seneschal. This is nothing like ruling beside him. This is horrible. They will never listen to me.

The serpent's tongue flicks out, tasting the air. I am trembling, but I refuse to let the fear I feel show. "Elfhame has a queen, and she is before you. Guards, seize Madoc. Seize everyone in his party. They have broken the High Court's hospitality most grievously. I want them imprisoned. I want them dead."

Madoc laughs. "Do you, Jude? The crown is gone. Why should they obey you when they could just as easily follow me?"

"Because I am the Queen of Elfhame, the true queen, chosen by the king and the land." My voice cracks on that last part. "And you are nothing but a traitor."

Do I sound convincing? I don't know. Probably not.

Randalin steps up beside me. "You heard her," he barks, surprising me. "Take them."

And that, more than anything I said, seems to bring the knights back to their task. They move to surround Madoc's company, swords drawn.

Then the serpent moves faster than I could have expected. It slides from the dais into the crowd, scattering the Folk who run from it in fear. It looks as though it has become larger already. The golden sheen on its scales is more pronounced. And in the wake of its path, the earth cracks and crumbles, as though some essential part of it is being drawn out.

The knights fall back, and Madoc draws his massive sword from the earth. The serpent slides toward him.

"Mother!" Oak screams, and takes off across the brugh toward her. Vivi attempts to grab him. Heather calls his name, but Oak's hooves are already pelting across the floor. Oriana turns in horror as he hurtles toward her and into the path of the snake.

Oak stops short, reading the warning in her body language. But all he does is draw a child's sword from a hilt at his side. The sword I insisted he learn through all those lazy afternoons in the mortal world. Holding it high, he puts himself between his mother and the serpent.

This is my fault. All my fault.

With a cry, I jump down from the dais and race toward my brother.

Madoc swings on the serpent as it rears up. His sword hits its side, glancing off its scales. It strikes back, knocking him down and then sliding over his body in its haste to chase its real prey: Grimsen.

The creature coils around the fleeing smith, fangs going into his back. A thin, reedy scream fills the air as Grimsen falls into a withering heap. In moments, he is a husk, as though the poison of the serpent's fangs ate away his essence from within.

I wonder when he dreamed up such a curse, if he ever thought to be afraid for himself.

When I look up, I see that most of the hall has been cleared. The knights have fallen back. The Bomb's archers have made themselves visible high on the walls, bowstrings held taut. Grima Mog has come to stand beside me, her blade at the ready. Madoc is staggering to his feet, but the leg the serpent slid over doesn't seem inclined to hold him up. I grab Oriana by the shoulder and shove her toward where Fand is standing. Then I get between Oak and the snake.

"Go with her," I shout at him, pointing toward his mother. "Get her to safety."

Oak looks up at me, his eyes wet with tears. His hands tremble on the sword, clutching it far too hard.

"You were very brave," I tell him. "You just have to be brave a little longer."

He gives me a slight nod, and with an agonized look back at Madoc, he races off after his mother.

The serpent turns, its tongue flickering toward me. The serpent, which was once Cardan.

"You want to be the Queen of Faerie, Jude?" Madoc shouts as he moves with a limping gait. "Then slay him. Slay the beast. Let's see if you have the bravery to do what needs to be done."

"Come, my lady," Fand pleads, urging me toward an exit as the serpent moves back toward the dais. The serpent's tongue flicks again, tasting the air, and I am gripped by fear and a horror so vast I am afraid I will be swallowed up by it.

When the serpent winds itself around the shattered remains of the throne, I let myself be led toward the doors, and once the rest of the Folk are through, I order

them shut and barred behind us.

CHAPTER 23

In the hall outside the brugh, everyone is shouting at once. The councilors are yelling at one another. Generals and knights are trying to secure who is supposed to go where. Someone is weeping. Courtiers are clutching at one another's hands, trying to make sense of what they saw. Even in a land of riddles and curses, where an isle can be called up from the sea, magic of this magnitude is rare.

My heart beats fast and hard, drowning out everything else. The Folk are asking me questions, but they seem very far away. My thoughts are filled with the image of Cardan's eyes going black, with the sound of his voice.

I spent much of my life guarding my heart. I guarded it so well that I could behave as though I didn't have one at all. Even now, it is a shabby, worm-eaten, and scabrous thing. But it is yours.

"My lady," says Grima Mog, pressing a hand against my back. "My lady, come with me."

At her touch, the present floods back in, loud and horrible. I am surprised to see the stout cannibal redcap in front of me. She grabs hold of my arm and hauls me into a stateroom.

"Get ahold of yourself," she growls.

Knees weak, I slide to the floor, one hand pressing against my chest, as though I am trying to keep my heart from beating through the cage of my ribs.

My dress is too heavy. I can't breathe.

I don't know what to do.

Someone is banging on the door, and I know I need to get up. I need to make a plan. I need to answer their questions. I need to fix this, but I can't.

I can't.

I can't even think.

"I am going to stand," I promise Grima Mog, who is probably a little alarmed. If I were her, looking at me and realizing I was in charge, I'd be alarmed, too. "I am going to be okay in a minute."

"I know you are," she says.

But how can I when I keep seeing the black shape of the snake moving through the brugh, keep seeing its dead eyes and curving fangs?

I reach for the table and use it to push me to my feet. "I need to find the Royal Astrologer."

"Don't be ridiculous," says Grima Mog. "You're the queen. If you need Lord Baphen, then he can come to you. Right now, you're standing between any one of these low Court denizens and being the ruler of Elfhame. It won't be only Madoc who wants to take over now. Anyone might decide that killing you would be a good way to make their case for being in charge. You need to keep your boot on their throats."

My head is swimming. I need to get it together. "You're right," I say. "I need a new Grand General. Will you accept the position?"

Grima Mog's surprise is obvious. "Me? But what of Yorn?"

"He doesn't have the experience," I say. "And I don't like him."

"I tried to kill you," she reminds me.

"You've described pretty much every important relationship in my life," I return, taking slow, shallow breaths. "I like you fine."

That makes her grin toothily. "Then I ought to get to work."

"Ascertain where the serpent is at all times," I say. "I want someone to watch over it, and I want to know immediately if it moves. Maybe we can keep it trapped in the brugh. The walls are thick, the doors are heavy, and the floor is earth. And I want you to send me the Bomb. Fand. My sister Taryn. And a runner who can report directly to you."

Fand turns out to be just outside the door. I give her a very short list of people to let inside.

Once Grima Mog is gone, I allow myself another moment of helpless misery. Then I force myself to pace the floor and think through what's ahead of me.

Madoc's army is still anchored off the isles. I must discover what troops I have left and whether it's enough to make him wary of an outright invasion.

Cardan is gone. My mind comes to a stop after that, and I have to force myself to think again. Until I speak with Baphen, I refuse to accept that Grimsen's words have no answer. There has to be a loophole. There has to be a trick. There has to be a way to break the curse—a way Cardan can survive.

And then there are the Folk who must be convinced that I am the legitimate Queen of Faerie.

By the time the Bomb comes into the room, face covered and in her long, hooded cloak, I am composed.

Nonetheless, when we look at each other, she comes immediately over and puts her arms around me. I think of the Roach and of all the curses that cannot be broken, and for a moment, I hug her tight.

"I need to know who is still loyal to me," I tell her, letting go and returning to my pacing. "Who is throwing in their lot with Madoc and who has decided to play for themselves."

She nods. "I will find out."

"And if one of your spies overhears plans for my assassination, they do not need to bring me word. Nor do I care how vague the plot or how uncommitted the players. I just want them all dead." Perhaps that is not how I ought to handle things, but Cardan is not here to stay my hand. I do not have the luxury of time or of mercy.

"It will be done," she says. "Expect me with news tonight."

When she goes out, Taryn comes in. She looks at me as though she's half-expecting an enormous serpent to be in here, too.

"How's Oak?" I ask.

"With Oriana," she says. "Who isn't sure if she's a prisoner or not."

"She showed me hospitality in the North, and I aim to return the favor." Now that shock is receding, I find that I am *angry*—at Madoc, at Oriana, at the whole of Elfhame. But that is a distraction, too. "I need your help."

"Mine?" Taryn asks, surprised.

"You chose a wardrobe for me when I was seneschal, to make me seem the part. I saw Locke's estate and how changed it was. Can you put together a throne room for me? And maybe find clothing from somewhere for the next few days. I don't care where it comes from, so long as it makes me appear to be the Queen of Faerie."

Taryn takes a big breath. "Okay. I've got this. I'll make you look good."

“I’m going to have to look *really* good,” I say.

At that, she gives me an actual smile. “I don’t understand how you do it,” she says. “I don’t understand how you can be so calm.”

I’m not sure what to say. I don’t feel calm at all. I am a maelstrom of emotions. All I want to do is scream.

There’s another knock. Fand opens the door. “Your pardon,” she says. “But Lord Baphen is here, and you said you wanted to see him immediately.”

“I’ll find a better place for you to receive people,” Taryn assures me, slipping past.

“The Council wants an audience, too,” Fand says. “They’d like to accompany Lord Baphen. They claim there’s nothing he knows that they ought not hear.”

“No,” I say. “Just him.”

A few moments later, Baphen enters. He is wearing a long blue robe, a shade lighter than his navy hair. A bronze cap sits atop his head. The Royal Astrologer was one of the few members of the Council that I liked and who I thought might like me, but right now, I regard him with dread.

“There really is nothing that—” he begins.

I cut him off. “I want to know *everything* about the prophecy you made when Cardan was born. I want you to tell me it exactly.”

He gives me a look of slight surprise. On the Council, as the High King’s seneschal, I was deferential. And as High Queen, I was in too much shock to make any shows of authority.

Lord Baphen grimaces. “Giving the High King unfortunate news is never a pleasure. But it was Lady Asha who frightened me. She gave me such a look of hatred that I felt it to the tips of my ears. I think she believed I exaggerated somehow, to advance my own plots.”

“It seems clear now that you did not,” I say, voice dry. “Tell it to me.”

He clears his throat. “There are two parts. *He will be the destruction of the crown and the ruination of the throne. Only out of his spilled blood can a great ruler rise*.”

The second part is worse than the first. For a moment, the words just ring in my head.

“Did you give the prophecy to Prince Cardan?” I ask. “Does Madoc know it?”

“The High King may have been told by his mother,” Lord Baphen says. “I assumed—I thought Prince Cardan would never come to power. And then when he did, well, I supposed he would become a bad High King and be slain. I

thought it was an unambiguous fate. As for Madoc, I do not know if he ever heard any part of it."

"Is there a way to break the curse?" I ask in unsteady tones. "Before he died, Grimsen said: *No true love's kiss will stop it. No riddle will fix it. Only death*. But that cannot be true. I thought the prophecy around his birth would provide an answer, but …" I cannot finish the sentence. There is an answer in it, but it's one I don't want to hear.

"If there is a way to reverse the, uh … transformation," Baphen begins, "I do not know it."

I clasp my hands together, sinking my nails into the skin, panic flooding me in a dizzy rush. "And there's nothing else the stars foretold? No other detail you're leaving out?"

"I am afraid not," he says.

"Can you look at your star charts again?" I ask. "Go back to them and see if there's something you overlooked the first time. Look at the sky, and see if there's some new answer."

He nods. "If that's what you wish, Your Majesty." His tone suggests that he's agreed to many equally useless commands on the behalf of previous rulers.

I don't care that I am unreasonable. "Yes. Do it."

"Will you speak with the Council first?" he asks.

Even a short delay in Baphen's attempting to find a solution sets my teeth on edge, but if I wish to be accepted as the rightful queen, I need the support of the Living Council. I cannot delay them forever.

Is this what it is to rule? To be far from the action, stuck on a throne or in a series of well-appointed rooms, reliant on information brought to you by others? Madoc would *hate* this.

"I will," I say.

At the door, Fand tells me a room is ready for me to move to. I am impressed by the swiftness with which Taryn has arranged things.

"Is there anything else?" I ask.

"A runner came from Grima Mog," she says. "The king—I mean, the serpent—is no longer in the throne room. It seems to have gotten out through the crack in the earth made by Madoc's blade. And—and I am not sure what to make of this, but it's snowing. *Inside* the brugh."

Cold dread races through me. My hand goes to the hilt of Nightfell. I want to ride out. I want to find it, but if I do—what then? The answer is more than I can

bear. I close my eyes against it. When I open them, I feel as though I am spinning. Then I ask to be conducted to my new throne room.

Taryn stands at the entrance, waiting to escort me inside. She's chosen an enormous parlor and stripped it of its furniture. A large, carved wooden chair sits on a rug-covered platform in the echoing space. Candles glow from the floor, and I can see how the flickering shadows will help me appear intimidating—perhaps even play down my mortality.

Two of Cardan's old guard stand to either side of the wooden chair, and a small moth-winged page kneels on one of the rugs.

"Not bad," I tell my sister.

Taryn grins. "Get up there. I want to see the whole picture."

I sit in the chair, my back straight, and look out at the dancing flames. Taryn gives me a very mortal thumbs-up.

"Okay," I say. "Then I'm ready for the Living Council."

Fand nods and goes out to fetch them. As the door shuts, I see she and Taryn discussing something. But then I have to turn my attention to Randalin and the rest of the councilors, who are grim-faced as they enter the room.

You have only seen the least of what I can do, I think at them, trying to believe it myself.

"Your Majesty," Randalin says, but in such a way that it sounds a little like a question. He supported me in the brugh, but I am not sure how long that will last.

"I've appointed Grima Mog to be the Grand General," I tell them. "She cannot come and present herself at the moment, but we should have a report from her soon."

"Are you sure that's wise?" says Nihuar, pressing together her thin green lips, her mantis-like body shifting with obvious distress. "Perhaps we ought to wait for the High King to be restored before we come to any decision about such important matters."

"Yes," says Randalin eagerly, looking at me as though expecting some answer about how we'll do that.

"Slithery snake king," says Fala, dressed in lavender motley. "Rules over a Court of nice mice."

I remember the Bomb's words and do not flinch, nor do I attempt to argue. I wait, and my silence unnerves them into silence themselves. Even Fala goes quiet.

“Lord Baphen,” I say quellingly, “does not yet have an answer to how the High King may be restored.”

The others turn to him.

Only out of his spilled blood can a great ruler rise.

Baphen nods briefly in assent. “I do not, nor am I sure such a thing is possible.”

Nihuar appears astonished. Even Mikkel seems taken aback by that news.

Randalin glares at me with accusation. As though everything is over and we’ve lost.

There is a way, I want to insist. *There is a way; I just don’t know it yet.*

“I’ve come to make my report to the queen,” comes a voice from the doorway. Grima Mog stands there.

She strides past the Council members with a brief nod. They eye her speculatively.

“We would all hear what you know,” I say to murmurs of reluctant approval.

“Very well. We received intelligence that Madoc intends to attack at dawn the day after next. He hopes to catch us unprepared, especially since a few more Courts have flown to his banner. But our real problem is how many Folk plan to sit out the battle and see which way the wind blows.”

“Are you sure this information is accurate?” Randalin asks suspiciously. “How did you obtain it?”

Grima Mog nods toward me. “With the help of her spies.”

“*Her* spies?” Baphen repeats. I can see his putting together some of the information I had in the past and coming to new conclusions about how I got it. I feel a jolt of satisfaction at the thought that I no longer have to pretend to be entirely without my own resources.

“Do we have enough of our own army to push him back?” I ask Grima Mog.

“We are in no way assured of victory,” she says diplomatically. “But he cannot yet overwhelm us.”

That’s a long way from where we were a day ago. But it’s better than nothing.

“And there is a belief,” Grima Mog says. “A belief that has grown swiftly—that the person to rule Elfhame is the one who will slay the serpent. That spilling Greenbriar blood is as good as having it in your veins.”

“A very Unseelie belief,” Mikkel says. I wonder if he agrees with it. I wonder if that’s what he expects from me.

“The king had a pretty head,” says Fala. “But can he do without it?”

“Where is he?” I ask. “Where is the High King?”

“The serpent was spotted on the shores of Insear. A knight from the Court of Needles tried his luck against the creature. We found what was left of the knight’s body an hour ago and tracked the creature’s movements from there. It leaves marks where it goes, black lines scorching the earth. The difficulty is that those lines spread, blurring the trail and poisoning the land. Still, we followed the serpent back to the palace. It seems to have taken the brugh for its den.”

“The king is tied to the land,” says Baphen. “Cursing the king means cursing the land itself. My queen, there may be only one way to heal—”

“Enough,” I say to Baphen and Randalin and the rest of the Council, startling the guards. I stand. “We are done with this discussion.”

“But you must—” begins Randalin, then he seems to see something in my face and goes quiet.

“We’re meant to advise you,” says Nihuar in her syrupy voice. “We are thought to be very wise.”

“Are you?” I ask, and the voice that comes out is honeyed malice, the exact tone Cardan would have used. It spills out of me as though I am no longer in control of my mouth. “Because wisdom ought to urge you not to court my displeasure. Perhaps a stay in the Tower of Forgetting will recall you to your place.”

They all become very quiet.

I had imagined myself different from Madoc, but already, given the chance, I am becoming a tyrant, threatening in place of convincing. Unstable instead of steadying.

I am suited to the shadows, to the art of knives and bloodshed and coups, to poisoned words and poisoned cups. I never expected to rise so high as the throne. And I fear that I am utterly unsuited for the task.

It feels more like compulsion than choice as my fingers unlatch the heavy bolts of the brugh doors.

Beside me, Fand tries to dissuade me, not for the first time. “Let us at least—”

“Remain here,” I tell her. “Do not follow me.”

“My lady,” she says, which is not exactly agreement but will have to do.

I slip inside the large chamber and let the cloak fall from my shoulders.

The serpent is there, coiled around the ruined throne. It has grown in size. The width of its body is such that it could swallow a horse whole with a mere stretch

of its fanged jaws. There are yet some torches lit among the spilled food and turned-over tables, illuminating its black scales. Something of the golden sheen has dulled. I can't tell if it's illness or some further transformation. Fresh-looking scratches run along one side of its body, as though from a sword or spear. Out of the crack in the floor of the brugh, steam floats gently into the chamber, carrying the smell of hot stone.

"Cardan?" I ask, taking a few soft steps toward the dais.

The serpent's great head swings toward me. Its coils slide, unwinding itself to hunt. I stop, and it does not come for me, although its head moves sinuously back and forth, alert to both threat and opportunity.

I force myself to keep walking, one step after another. The serpent's golden eyes follow me, the only part of it—save for its temper—that seems like Cardan at all.

I might have grown into something else, a High King as monstrous as Dain. And if I did—if I fulfilled that prophecy—I ought *to be stopped. And I believe that you would stop me.*

I think of the stitches in my side and the white flowers pushing up through the snow. I concentrate on that memory and try to draw on the power of the land. He's a descendant of Mab and the rightful king. I am his wife. I healed myself. Surely I can heal him.

"Please," I say to the dirt floor of the brugh, to the earth itself. "I will do whatever you want. I will give up the crown. I will make any bargain. Just please fix him. Help me break the curse."

I concentrate and concentrate, but the magic doesn't come.

CHAPTER 24

The Bomb finds me there, stepping out of the shadows in a graceful movement. She isn't wearing her mask.

"Jude?" she says.

I realize how much closer to the serpent I have crept. I sit on the dais, perhaps three feet from him. He has grown so used to me that he's closed his golden eyes.

"Your sisters are worried," she says, coming as close to us as she dares. The serpent's head rises, tongue darting out to touch the air, and she goes very still.

"I'm fine," I say. "I just needed to think."

No true love's kiss will stop it. No riddle will fix it. Only death.

She gives the serpent an evaluating look. "Does he know you?"

"I can't tell," I say. "He seems not to mind my being here. I've been telling him how he can't hold me to my promises."

The hardest thing—the *impossible* thing—is to get past the memory of Cardan telling me he loved me. He said those words, and I didn't answer him. I thought there would be time. And I was happy—despite everything—I was *happy*, just before everything went so terribly wrong. We won. Everything was going to work out. And he loved me.

"There are a few things you need to know," the Bomb says. "I believe Grima Mog gave you a report about Madoc's movements."

“She did,” I say.

“We caught a few courtiers speculating about assassinating the mortal queen. Their plans got blown up.” A small smile crosses her face. “As did they.”

I don’t know if I should be happy about that or not. Right now it makes me feel tired.

“The Ghost has gathered information about the loyalties of the individual rulers,” she says. “We can go over all those. But the most interesting thing is that you have a message from your father. Madoc wants a guarantee that he and Lady Nore and Lord Jarel may come to the palace and treat with you.”

“They want to come here?” I climb down from the dais. The serpent’s gaze follows me. “Why? Aren’t they satisfied with the results of their last parlay?”

“I know not,” she says, a brittleness in her voice that reminds me how much she hates the rulers of the Court of Teeth, and how deservedly. “But Madoc has asked to see you and your brother and sisters. As well as his wife.”

“Very well,” I say. “Let him come, along with Lady Nore and Lord Jarel. But let him know that he will bring no weapon into Elfhame. He does not come here as my guest. He has only my word that he will come to no harm, not the hospitality of my house.”

“And what is your word worth?” the Bomb asks, sounding hopeful.

“I guess we’ll find out.” At the door, I look back toward the serpent. Beneath where it rests, the ground has blackened to almost the color of its scales.

After several messages back and forth, it is determined that Madoc and his company will arrive at dusk. I have agreed to receive them on the palace grounds, having no interest in letting them inside again. Grima Mog brings a semicircle of knights to watch over us, with archers in the trees. The Bomb brings spies, who hide themselves in higher and lower places. Among their number is the Ghost, his ears sealed with soft wax.

My carved chair has been brought outside and is set on a new, higher platform. Cushions rest below it, for my brother and sisters—and Oriana, if she will deign to sit with us.

There are no banquet tables and no wine. The only concession we have made to their comfort is a rug over the muddy ground. Torches blaze to either side of me, but that’s for my own poor mortal eyesight, not for them.

Overhead, storm clouds sweep by, crackling with lightning. Earlier, hailstones as large as apples were reported raining down on Insweal. Weather like this is unknown in Elfhame. I can only assume that Cardan, in his cursed form, is cursing the weather as well.

I sit in the carved wooden chair and arrange my gown in what I hope is a regal way. I brush off dust from the hem.

"You missed a bit," the Bomb says, pointing. "Your Majesty."

She has taken up a place to the right of the platform. I shake off my skirts again, and she smothers a smile as my brother arrives with both of my sisters in tow. When the Bomb pulls on her face covering, she seems to recede entirely into the shadows.

The last time I saw Oak, his sword was drawn and terror was on his face. I am glad to replace that memory with this one: his rushing up to me, grinning.

"Jude!" he says, climbing up onto my lap, making short work of all the careful arranging of skirts. His horns butt against my shoulder. "I have been explaining skateboarding to Oriana, and she doesn't think I should do it."

I look out, expecting to see her, but there's only Vivi and Taryn. Vivi is dressed in jeans and a brocade vest over a floofy white shirt, a compromise between mortal and immortal style. Taryn is dressed in the gown I saw in her closet, the one patterned with forest animals looking out from behind leaves. Oak has on a little coat of midnight blue. On his brow someone has set a golden diadem to remind us all that he may be the very last of the Greenbriar line.

"I need your help," I tell Oak. "But it will be very hard and very annoying."

"What do I have to do?" he asks, looking highly suspicious.

"You have to look like you're paying attention, but stay quiet. No matter what I say. No matter what Dad says. No matter what happens."

"That's not helping," he protests.

"It would be a huge help," I insist.

With a dramatic sigh, he slides off me and takes his sulky place on the cushions.

"Where's Heather?" I ask Vivi.

"In the library," she says with a guilty look. I wonder if she thinks Heather ought to be back in the human world and it's only Vivi's selfishness that's keeping her here, not realizing they are now both working toward the same goal. "She says that if this were a movie, someone would find a poem about cursed snakes and it would give us the clue we needed, so she's gone off to find one. The archivists don't know what to do with her."

“She’s really adapting to Faerie,” I say.

Vivi’s only reply is a tight, sorrowful smile.

Then Oriana arrives, escorted in by Grima Mog, who takes a position parallel and opposite the Bomb. Like me, Oriana still wears the gown she had on in the brugh. Looking at the setting sun, I realize that an entire day must have passed since then. I am not sure how long I sat with the serpent, only that I seem to have lost time without noticing. It feels like forever and no time at all since Cardan was put under the curse.

“They’re here,” Fand says, hurrying up the path to stand beside the Bomb. And behind her is the thunder of hooves. Madoc comes mounted on a stag, dressed not in his customary armor but in a doublet of deep blue velvet. When he dismounts, I notice he has a pronounced limp where the serpent slid over him.

Behind him comes an ice coach pulled by faerie horses as crystalline as if they were conjured from frozen waves. As the rulers of the Court of Teeth climb out, the coach and the horses melt away.

Lady Nore and Lord Jarel are in white furs, despite the air not being particularly cold. Behind them are a single servant, bearing a small chest etched in silver, and Queen Suren. Though she is their ruler, she wears only a simple white shift. A gold crown has been stitched to her forehead, and a thin gold chain that penetrates the skin of her wrist functions as her new leash, with a bar on one side to keep the chain from slipping free.

Fresh scars cover her face in the shape of the bridle she wore when last I saw her.

I try to keep my face impassive, but the horror of it is hard to ignore.

Madoc steps ahead of the others, smiling at us as though we were sitting for a family portrait that he was about to join.

Oak looks up and pales, seeing Queen Suren’s leash piercing her skin. Then he looks at Madoc, as though expecting an explanation.

None is forthcoming.

“Would you like cushions?” I ask Madoc’s little group. “I can have some brought.”

Lady Nore and Lord Jarel take in the gardens, the knights, the Bomb with her covered face, Grima Mog, and my family. Oak goes back to sulking, lying facedown on a pillow instead of sitting. I want to give him a shove with my foot for rudeness, but maybe it’s a good moment for him to be rude. I can’t let the Court of Teeth think they are of too great importance to us. As for Madoc, he knows us too well to be impressed.

“We will stand,” Lady Nore says, lip curling.

It’s hard to sit in a dignified way on a cushion, and it would require her lowering herself very far beneath me. Of course she refused my offer.

I think of Cardan and the way he wore his crown askew, the way he lounged on the throne. It gave him an air of unpredictability and reminded everyone that he was powerful enough to make the rules. I have resolved to try to emulate his example where I can, including with annoying seating.

“You are bold to come here,” I say.

“Of all people, you should appreciate a little boldness.” Madoc’s gaze goes to Vivi and Taryn and then back to me. “I mourned you. I truly believed you died.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t wet your cap in my blood,” I say. At my side, Grima Mog’s eyebrows rise.

“I cannot blame you for being angry,” he says. “But we have been angry at each other for too long, Jude. You’re not the fool I took you for, and for my part, I don’t want to hurt you. You’re the High Queen of Faerie. Whatever you did to get there, I can only applaud it.”

He might not want to hurt me, but that doesn’t mean he won’t.

“She *is* the queen,” Taryn says. “The only reason she didn’t die out in the snow is that the land healed her.”

A murmur moves through the Folk around us. Lady Nore looks at me with open disgust. I note that neither she nor her husband has made a proper bow, nor used my title. How it must gall her to see me on even this approximation of a throne. How she must hate the very idea that I have a claim to the real one.

“It is the nature of the child to achieve what a parent can only dream,” says Madoc. Now he looks at Oriana, eyes narrowing. “But let us remember that much of this family disagreement came from my attempt to put Oak on the throne. I have always been as happy to rule through my children as to wear the crown myself.”

Anger flares up inside me, hot and bright. “And woe to those children if they will not be ruled by you.”

He makes a gesture of dismissal. “Let us think through your next moves, High Queen Jude. You and your army, led by your formidable new general, clash with mine. There is a great battle. Perhaps you win, and I retreat to the North to make new plans. Or perhaps I am dead.

“Then what? There is still a serpent king to contend with, one whose scales are harder than the hardest armor, whose poison seeps into the land. And you are still mortal. There is no more Blood Crown to keep the Folk of Elfhame tied to

your rule, and even if there were, you could not wear it. Already Lady Asha is gathering a circle of courtiers and knights around herself, all of them telling her that as Cardan's mother, she should be regent until his return. No, you will be fending off assassins and pretenders for your entire reign."

I glance over at the Bomb, who did not mention Lady Asha in her list of things I needed to know. The Bomb gives a slight nod of acknowledgment.

It's a bleak picture, and no part of it is untrue.

"So maybe Jude quits," Vivi says, sitting upright on the cushions by sheer force of will. "Abdicates. Whatever."

"She won't," Madoc says. "You've only ever half-understood anything Jude was up to, perhaps because if you did, you couldn't continue to act as though there are easy answers. She's made herself a target to keep the target from being on her brother's back."

"Don't lecture me," Vivi returns. "This is all your fault. Oak's being in danger. Cardan's being cursed. Jude's nearly dying."

"I am here," says Madoc. "To make it right."

I study his face, recalling the way he told the person he thought was Taryn that if it pained her that she murdered her husband, then she could put the weight on him. Perhaps he sees what he's doing now as something in the same line, but I cannot agree.

Lord Jarel takes a step forward. "That child at your feet, that's the rightful heir of the Greenbriar line, isn't it?"

"Yes," I say. "Oak will be High King one day."

Thankfully, this once, my brother doesn't contradict me.

Lady Nore nods. "You are mortal. You will not last long."

I decide not to even argue. Here, in Faerie, mortals can remain young, but those years will come on us the moment we set foot in the human world. Even if I could avoid that fate, Madoc's argument was persuasive. I will not have an easy time on the throne without Cardan. "That's what *mortal* means," I say with a sigh that I don't have to fake. "We die. Think of us like shooting stars, brief but bright."

"Poetic," she says. "And fatalistic. Very well. You seem as though you can be reasonable. Madoc wishes us to make you an offer. We have the means to control your serpent husband."

I feel the blood rush behind my ears. "Control him?"

"As you would any animal." Lord Jarel gives me a smile that's full of menace. "We have a magical bridle in our possession. Created by Grimsen himself to

leash anything. In fact, it will fit itself to the creature being restrained. Now that Grimsen is no more, such an item is more valuable than ever."

My gaze goes to Suren and her scars. Is that what she was wearing? Did they cut it off her to give to me?

Lady Nore speaks, taking up her husband's theme. "The straps will slowly sink into his skin, and Cardan will be forever yours."

I am not sure what she quite means by that. "*Mine?* He's under a curse."

"And unlikely to ever be otherwise, if Grimsen's words are to be believed," she goes on. "But were he somehow to be returned to his former state, he would still remain eternally in your power. Isn't that delicious?"

I bite down on my tongue to avoid reacting. "That's an extraordinary offer," I say, turning from her to Madoc. "By which I mean it sounds like a trick."

"Yes," he says. "I can see that. But we will each get what we want. Jude, you will be the High Queen for as long as you like. With the serpent bound, you can rule unopposed. Taryn, you will be the sister to the queen and back in the good graces of the Court. No one can keep you from claiming Locke's land and estates for yourself. Perhaps your sister will even throw in a title."

"You never know," I say, which is dangerously close to being drawn in to the picture he's painting.

"Vivienne, you shall be able to return to the mortal world and have all the fun you can conjure, without the intrusion of family. And Oak can live with his mother again." He looks at me with the intensity of battle in his eyes. "We will do away with the Living Council, and I will take their place. I will guide your hand, Jude."

I look over at the Court of Teeth. "And what will they get?"

Lord Jarel smiles. "Madoc has agreed to marry your brother, Oak, to our little queen, so that when he ascends the throne, his bride will ascend with him."

"Jude …?" Oak asks nervously. Oriana takes his hand and squeezes it tightly.

"You can't be serious," Vivi says. "Oak shouldn't have anything to do with these people or their creepy daughter."

Lord Jarel fixes her with a look of furious contempt. "You, Madoc's only trueborn child, are the person of least consequence here. What a disappointment you must be."

Vivi rolls her eyes.

My gaze goes to the little queen, studying her pale face and her oddly blank eyes. Although it is her fate we are discussing, she does not look very interested.

Nor does she look as though she has been well treated. I can't imagine tying her to my brother.

"Put the question of Oak's marriage aside for a moment," Madoc says. "Do you want the bridle, Jude?"

It is a monstrous thing, the idea of tying Cardan to me in eternal obedience. What I *want* is him back, him standing beside me, him laughing at all this. I would settle for even his worst self, his cruelest trickster self, if only he could be here.

I think of Cardan's words in the brugh, before he destroyed the crown: *neither loyalty nor love should be compelled*.

He was right. Of course he was right. And yet, I want the bridle. I want it desperately. I can imagine myself on a rebuilt throne with the serpent torpid beside me, a symbol of my power and a reminder of my love. He would never be entirely lost to me.

It is a horrific image and just as horrifically compelling.

I would have hope, at least. And what is the alternative? Fighting a battle and sacrificing the lives of my people? Hunting down the serpent and giving up any chance of having Cardan back? For what? I am tired of fighting.

Let Madoc rule through me. Let him try, at least.

"Swear to me that the bridle does nothing else," I say.

"Nothing," says Lady Nore. "Only allows you to control the creature it's used on—if you say the words of command. And once you've agreed to our terms, we will tell them to you."

Lord Jarel waves forward his servant, who removes the bridle from the chest, throwing it down in a heap in front of me. It shines, golden. A bunch of straps, finely wrought, and a possible future that doesn't involve losing what I have left.

"I wonder," I say, considering it, "with such a powerful object in your possession, why you didn't use it yourselves."

He doesn't answer for a moment that drags on just a little too long. "Ah," I say, recalling the fresh scratches along the serpent's scales. If I inspect that bridle, I bet there's still drying blood on it from knights of the Court of Teeth—perhaps volunteers from Madoc's army as well. "You *couldn't* bridle him, could you? How many did you lose?"

Lord Jarel looks ill-pleased with me.

Madoc answers. "A battalion—and part of the Crooked Forest caught on fire. The creature wouldn't allow us to approach it. He's fast and deadly, and his poison seems inexhaustible."

“But in the hall,” says Lady Nore, “he knew Grimsen was his enemy. We believe you can lure him. Like maidens with unicorns of old. You can bridle him. And if you die trying, Oak comes to his throne early with our queen beside him.”

“Pragmatic,” I say.

“Consider taking the deal,” Grima Mog says. I turn to her, and she shrugs. “Madoc’s right. It will be hard to hold the throne otherwise. I have no doubt you’ll be able to bridle the serpent, nor that it will make for a weapon the likes of which no army in all of Faerie has seen before. That’s power, girl.”

“Or we could murder them right now. Take the bridle as our spoils,” the Bomb says, removing the netting that covers her face. “They’re already traitors. They’re unarmed. And knowing them, they intend to trick you. You admitted as much yourself, Jude.”

“Liliver?” says Lady Nore. It’s odd to hear her called by something other than her code name, but the Bomb was held in the Court of Teeth before she became a spy. They would only know to call her by what she went by then.

“You remember me,” the Bomb says. “Know that I also remember you.”

“You may have the bridle, but you do not yet know how to work it,” Lord Jarel says. “You cannot bind the serpent without us.”

“I think I could get it out of her,” the Bomb says. “I’d enjoy trying.”

“Are you going to allow her to speak to us that way?” Lady Nore demands of Madoc, as though he can do anything.

“Liliver wasn’t speaking to you at all,” I say, mild-voiced. “She was speaking to me. And since she’s my advisor, I would be foolish not to give her words careful consideration.”

Madoc barks out a laugh. “Oh, come now, if you’ve met Lord Jarel and Lady Nore, you know they are spiteful enough to deny you, no matter what torment your spy invented. And you want that bridle, daughter.”

The Court of Teeth backed Madoc to get closer to the throne. Now they see a path to ruling Elfhame themselves, through Oak. As soon as Oak and Suren are married, I will have a target on my back. And so will Madoc.

But I will also have the serpent, bound to me.

A serpent who is a corruption on the land itself.

“Show me you are acting in good faith,” I say. “Cardan fulfilled what you asked of him in the matter of Orlagh of the Undersea. Release her from whatever doom you hold over her. She and her daughter hate me, so you cannot worry about their rushing to my aid.”

“I imagined you hated them as well,” says Madoc, frowning.

“I want to see Cardan’s sacrifice mean what he wanted it to mean,” I say. “And I want to know that you aren’t weaseling out of every bargain you can.”

He nods. “Very well. It is done.”

I take a deep breath. “I will not commit Oak to anything, but if you want to call a halt to the war, tell me how the bridle works, and let us work toward peace.”

Lord Jarel steps up onto the platform, causing the guards to move in front of him, weapons keeping him from me.

“Would you prefer I say it aloud, in front of everyone?” he asks, annoyed.

I wave away the guards, and he leans down to whisper the answer in my ear. “Take three hairs from your own head and knot them around the bridle. You will be bound together.” Then he steps back. “Now, do you agree to our compact?”

I look at the three of them. “When the High King is bridled and tame, then I will give you everything you asked for, everything that’s within my power to give. But you will have nothing before that.”

“Then this is what you must do, Jude,” Madoc tells me. “Tomorrow, hold a feast for the low Courts and invite us. Explain that we have put aside our differences in the face of a larger threat and that we gave you the means to capture the serpent king.

“Our armies will gather on the rocks of Insweal, but not to fight. You will take the bridle and lure the serpent to you. Once you put it on him, issue the first command. He will show himself tame, and everyone will cheer for you. It will cement your power and give you an excuse to reward us. And reward us you shall.”

Already, he seeks to rule through me. “It will be nice to have a queen who can tell all the lies you cannot, won’t it?” I say.

Madoc smiles at me with no malice in it. “It will be good to be a family again.”

Nothing about this feels right, except for the smooth leather of the bridle in my hands.

On my way out of the palace, I pass by the throne room, but when I let myself inside, there is no sign of the serpent except for papery folds of torn golden skin.

I walk through the night to the rocky beach. There, I kneel on the stone and toss a wadded-up scrap of paper into the waves.

If you ever loved him, I wrote, *help me*.

I lie on my back on the rug before the fire in my old rooms. Taryn sits next to me, picking at a roasted chicken she got from the palace kitchen. A whole tray of food is spread out on the floor—cheese and bread, currants and gooseberries, pomegranates and damson plums, along with a pitcher of thick cream. Vivi and Heather rest on the other side, their legs tangled together and hands clasped. Oak is lining up berries and then bowling them over with plums, something I would have once objected to but am not about to now.

"It's better than fighting, right?" Taryn says, taking a steaming kettle off the hob and pouring water into a pot. She adds leaves, and the scent of mint and elderflower fills the air. "A truce. An unlikely truce."

None of us answers, mulling over the question. I promised Madoc nothing concrete, but I have no doubt that at the banquet tonight, he intends to begin pulling authority toward himself. A trickle that swiftly becomes a flood, until I am only a figurehead with no real power. The temptation of this line of attack is that one can always convince oneself that that fate is avoidable, that one can reverse any losses, that one can outmaneuver him.

"What was wrong with that girl?" Oak asks. "Queen Suren."

"They're not particularly nice, the Court of Teeth," I tell him, sitting up to accept a cup from Taryn. Despite going so long without sleep, I am not tired. Nor am I hungry, though I have made myself eat. I do not know what I am.

Vivi snorts. “I guess you could say that. You could also call a volcano ‘warm.’”

Oak frowns. “Are we going to help her?”

“If you decide to marry her, we could demand that the girl live here until you’re older,” I say. “And if she did, we’d keep her unfettered. I guess that would be a boon to her. But I still don’t think you should do it.”

“I don’t want to marry her—or anyone,” Oak says. “And I don’t want to be High King. Why can’t we just *help* her?”

The tea is too hot. The first sip burns my tongue.

“It’s not easy to help a queen,” Taryn says. “They’re not supposed to need helping.”

We lapse into silence.

“So will you take over Locke’s estate?” Vivi asks, turning toward my twin. “You don’t have to. You don’t have to have his baby, either.”

Taryn takes a gooseberry and rolls the pale citrine fruit between her fingers. “What do you mean?”

“I know that in Faerie, children are rare and precious and all that, but in the mortal world, there’s such a thing as abortion,” Vivi says. “And even here, there are changelings.”

“And adoption,” Heather puts in. “It’s your decision. No one would judge you.”

“If they did, I could cut off their hands,” I volunteer.

“I want the child,” Taryn says. “Not that I am not scared, but I’m also kind of excited. Oak, you’re not going to be the youngest kid anymore.”

“Good,” he says, rolling his bruised plum toward the cream jar.

Vivi intercepts it and takes a bite.

“Hey!” he says, but she only giggles mischievously.

“Did you find anything in the library?” I ask Heather, and try to pretend that my voice doesn’t quaver a little. I know she didn’t. If she had, she would have told me. And yet I ask anyway.

She yawns. “There were some wild stories. Not helpful, but wild. One was about a king of serpents who commands all the snakes in the world. Another about a serpent who puts two faerie princesses under a curse so they’re snakes—but only sometimes.

“And then there was this one about wanting a baby,” she says with a glance at Taryn. “A gardener’s wife couldn’t get pregnant. One day, she spots a cute green

snake in her garden and gets all weird about how even snakes have kids but she doesn't. The snake hears her and offers to be her son."

I raise my eyebrows. Oak laughs.

"He's an okay son, though," Heather says. "They make him a hole in the corner of their house, and he lives there. They feed him the same dinners they eat. It's all good until he gets big and decides he wants to marry a princess. And not like a viper princess or an anaconda princess, either. The snake wants to marry the human princess of the place where they live."

"How's that going to work?" Taryn asks.

Heather grins. "Dad goes to the king and makes the proposal on behalf of his snake kiddo. The king isn't into it, and so, in the manner of all fairy-tale people, instead of just refusing, he asks the snake to do three impossible things: first, turn all the fruit in the orchard to gems, then turn the floors of the palace to silver, and last, turn the walls of the palace to gold. Each time the dad reports back with one of these quests, the snake tells him what to do. First, Dad has to plant pits, which make jasper and jade fruit bloom overnight. Then he has to rub the floors of the palace with a discarded snakeskin to make them silver. Last, he has to rub the walls of the palace with venom, which turns them to gold."

"The dad is the one putting in all the effort," I murmur. It's so warm by the fire.

"He's kind of a helicopter parent." Heather's voice seems to come from very far away. "Anyway, finally, in despair, the king admits to his daughter that he basically sold her to a snake and that she has to go through with the marriage. So she does, but when they're alone, the snake takes off its skin and reveals itself as a banging hot guy. The princess is thrilled, but the king bursts into their bedroom and burns the skin, believing he's saving her life.

"The snake guy gives a great howl of despair and turns into a dove, flying away. The princess freaks out and weeps like crazy, then decides she's going to find him. Along the way, because this is a fairy tale and literally nothing makes sense, the princess meets a gossipy fox, who tells her that the birds are talking smack about a prince who was under the curse of an ogress and could not be cured without the blood of a bunch of birds—and also the blood of a fox. So you can pretty much figure out the rest. Poor fox, right?"

"Cold," Vivi says. "That fox was helping."

And that's the last I hear before I fall asleep to the sound of friendly voices talking over one another.

I wake to the dying embers of the fire, with a blanket over me.

Sleep has worked its strange magic, making the horror of the last two days recede enough for me to think a little better.

I see Taryn on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. I walk through the silent rooms and find Heather and Vivi in my bed. Oak isn't there, and I suspect that he's with Oriana.

I leave, finding a knight waiting for me. I recognize him as a member of Cardan's royal guard.

"Your Majesty," he says, hand to his heart. "Fand is resting. She asked me to watch over you until she returned."

I feel guilty not to have thought of whether Fand was working too long or too hard. Of course I need more than a single knight. "What shall I call you?"

"Artegowl, Your Majesty."

"Where are the rest of the High King's guard?" I ask.

He sighs. "Grima Mog has put us in charge of tracking the serpent's movements."

What a strange and sorrowful change from their previous mission, to keep Cardan safe. But I do not know if Artegowl would welcome my thoughts, nor if it is appropriate for me to give them. I leave him outside the doors to the royal chambers.

Inside, I am startled to find the Bomb sitting on the couch, turning a snow globe over in her hands. It has a cat inside and the words CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR PROMOTION—the gift Vivi brought for Cardan after his coronation. I didn't realize he kept it. As I watch the glittering white crystals swirl, I recall the report of snow falling inside the brugh.

The Bomb looks up at me, her shoulders slumped. The despair in her face mirrors my own.

"Probably I shouldn't have come," she says, which isn't like her at all.

"What's wrong?" I ask, coming fully inside the room.

"When Madoc came to make you his offer, I heard what Taryn said about you." She waits for me to understand, but I don't.

I shake my head.

"That the *land* healed you." She looks as though she half-expects me to deny it. I wonder if she's thinking about the stitches she removed in this room or how

I survived a fall from the rafters. “I thought that maybe … you could use that power to wake the Roach.”

When I joined the Court of Shadows, I knew nothing of spying. The Bomb has seen me fail before. Still, this failure is hard to admit. “I tried to break the curse on Cardan, but I couldn’t. Whatever I did, I don’t know how I did it or if I can do it again.”

“When I saw Lord Jarel and Lady Nore again, I couldn’t help remembering how much I owe the Roach,” the Bomb says. “If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have survived them. Even aside from how much I love him, I owe him. I have to make him better. If there’s anything you can do—”

I think about the flowers blooming up out of the snow. In that moment, I was magic.

I think about hope.

“I’ll try,” I say, stopping her. “If I can help the Roach, of course I want to. Of course I’ll try. Let’s go. Let’s go now.”

“Now?” the Bomb says, rising. “No, you came back to your chambers to sleep.”

“Even if the truce with Madoc and the Court of Teeth goes a lot better than I suspect it will, it’s possible that the serpent won’t allow me to bridle him,” I say. “I might not survive much longer. Better to do it as soon as possible.”

The Bomb puts her hand lightly on my arm. “Thank you,” she says, the human words awkward in her mouth.

“Don’t thank me yet,” I say.

“Perhaps a gift instead?” From her pocket, she pulls out a mask of black netting to match her own.

I change into black clothes and throw a heavy cloak over my shoulders. Then I don the mask, and we go together out the secret passage. I am surprised to find it has been modified since the last time I went through it, connected to the rest of the passageways through the walls of the palace. We go down through the wine cellar and into the new Court of Shadows. It’s much larger than the old rooms and much better appointed. It’s clear that Cardan financed this—or that they robbed the treasury behind his back. There is a kitchen area, full of crockery and with a fireplace large enough to cook a smallish pony in. We pass training rooms and costume rooms and a strategy room to rival the one belonging to the Grand General. I spot a few spies, some I know and some I do not.

The Ghost looks up from a table where he’s sitting, laying out cards in one of the back rooms, sandy hair hanging over his eyes. He looks at me with

suspicion. I roll up my mask.

"Jude," he says with relief. "You came."

I don't want to give either of them false hope. "I don't know if I can do anything, but I'd like to see him."

"This way," the Ghost says, rising and leading me to a little room hung with glowing glass orbs. The Roach lies on a bed. I am alarmed by the change in him.

His skin looks sallow, no longer the rich deep green of ponds, and there's a disturbing waxiness to it. He moves in sleep, then cries out and opens his eyes. They are unfocused, bloodshot.

I catch my breath, but a moment later, he has succumbed to dreams again.

"I thought he was sleeping," I say, horrified. I imagined the fairy-tale sleep of Snow White, imagined him still in a glass case, preserved exactly as he was.

"Help me find something to secure him with," the Bomb says, pressing his body down with hers. "The poison takes him like this sometimes, and I have to restrain him until the fit passes."

I can see why she came to me, why she feels as though something has to be done. I look around the room. Above a chest, there's a pile of spare sheets. The Ghost starts tearing them into strips. "Go ahead and start," he says.

With no idea what to do, I move to stand by the Roach's feet and close my eyes. I imagine the earth under me, imagine the power of it seeping up through the soles of my feet. I picture it filling my body.

Then I feel self-conscious and stupid and stop.

I can't do this. I am a mortal girl. I am the furthest thing from magic. I can't save Cardan. I can't heal anyone. This isn't going to work.

I open my eyes and shake my head.

The Ghost puts his hand on my shoulder, steps as close as he did when instructing me in the art of murder. His voice is soft. "Jude, stop trying to force it. Let it come."

With a sigh, I close my eyes again. And again I try to feel the earth beneath me. The land of Faerie. I think of Val Moren's words: *Do you think a seed planted in goblin soil grows to be the same plant it would have in the mortal world?* Whatever I am, I have been nurtured here. This is my home and my land.

I feel once again that strange sensation of being stung all over with nettles.

Wake, I think, putting my hand on his ankle. *I am your queen, and I command you to wake.*

A spasm racks the Roach's body. A vicious kick catches me in the stomach, knocking me against the wall.

I sag to the floor. The pain is intense enough that I am reminded how recently I received a gut wound.

“Jude!” the Bomb says, moving to secure his legs.

The Ghost kneels down by my side. “How hurt are you?”

I give a thumbs-up to indicate I’m okay, but I can’t speak yet.

The Roach cries again, but this time, it dwindles to something else. “Lil—” he says, voice sounding soft and scratchy, but speaking.

He’s conscious. Awake.

Healed.

He grabs hold of the Bomb’s hand. “I’m dying,” he says. “The poison—I was foolish. I don’t have long.”

“You’re not dying,” she says.

“There’s something I could never tell you while I lived,” he says, pulling her closer to him. “I love you, Liliver. I’ve loved you from the first hour of our meeting. I loved you and despaired. Before I die, I want you to know that.”

The Ghost’s eyebrows rise, and he glances at me. I grin. With both of us on the floor, I doubt the Roach has any idea we’re there.

Besides, he’s too busy looking at the Bomb’s shocked face.

“I never wanted—” he begins, then bites off the words, clearly reading her expression as horror. “You don’t have to say anything in return. But before I die—”

“*You’re not dying*,” she says again, and this time he seems to actually hear her.

“I see.” His face suffuses with shame. “I shouldn’t have spoken.”

I creep toward the kitchen, the Ghost behind me. As we head toward the door, I hear the Bomb’s soft voice.

“If you hadn’t,” she says, “then I couldn’t tell you that your feelings are returned.”

Outside, the Ghost and I walk back toward the palace, looking up at the stars. I think about how much cleverer the Bomb is than I am, because when she had her chance, she took it. She told him how she felt. I failed to tell Cardan. And now I never can.

I veer toward the pavilions of the low Courts.

The Ghost looks a question at me.

“There’s one more thing I need to do before I sleep,” I tell him.

He asks me nothing more, only matches his steps to mine.

We visit Mother Marrow and Severin, son of the Alderking who had Grimsen so long in his employ. They are my last hope. And though they meet me under the stars and hear me out politely, they have no answers.

"There must be a way," I insist. "There must be *something*."

"The difficulty," says Mother Marrow, "is that you already know how to end the curse. *Only death*, Grimsen said. You want another answer, but magic is seldom so convenient as to conform to our preferences."

The Ghost glowers nearby. I am grateful for his being with me, particularly right at the moment, when I am not sure I can bear to hear this alone.

"Grimsen would not have intended for the curse to be broken," says Severin. His curved horns make him look fearsome, but his voice is gentle.

"All right." I slump onto a nearby log. It wasn't as though I was expecting good news, but I feel the fog of sorrow closing over me again.

Mother Marrow narrows her eyes at me. "So you're going to use this bridle from the Court of Teeth? I'd like to see it. Grimsen made such interestingly awful things."

"You're welcome to have a look," I say. "I'm supposed to tie my own hair to it."

She snorts. "Well, don't do that. If you do that, you'll be bound along with the serpent."

You will be bound together.

The rage I feel is so great that for a moment, everything goes white, like a strike of lightning where the thunder is just behind it.

"So how ought it work?" I ask, my voice shaking with fury.

"There is probably a word of command," she tells me with a shrug. "Hard to know what that would be, though, and the thing is useless without it."

Severin shakes his head. "There's only one thing the smith ever wanted anyone to remember."

"His name," I say.

It is not long after I arrive back at the palace that Tatterfell comes with the dress that Taryn found for me to wear to the banquet. Servants bring food and set

about drawing me a bath. When I emerge, they perfume me and comb my hair as though I were a doll.

The gown is of silver, with stiff metal leaves stitched over it. I hide three knives in straps on my leg and one in a sheath between my breasts. Tatterfell looks askance at the fresh bruises coming up where I was kicked. But I say nothing of my misadventure, and she does not ask.

Growing up in Madoc's household, I have gotten used to the presence of servants. There were cooks in the kitchens and grooms to care for the stables and a few household servants to make sure the beds were made and that things were decently tidy. But I came and went mostly as I pleased, free to set my own schedule and do what I liked.

Now, between the royal guard, Tatterfell, and the other palace servants, my every move is accounted for. I am barely ever alone and then not for long. In all the time I gazed at Eldred, high upon his throne, or at Cardan, tipping back yet another goblet of wine at a revel with a forced laugh, I didn't understand the horror of being so powerful and so utterly powerless all at the same time.

"You may go," I say to them when my hair is braided and my ears hung in shining silver in the shapes of arrowheads.

I cannot trick a curse and do not know how to fight one. I must somehow set that aside and focus on what I can do: evade the trap set for me by the Court of Teeth and avoid Madoc's bid to restrict my power. I believe he intends to keep me High Queen, with my monstrous High King forever by my side. And imagining that, I cannot help thinking how terrible it would be for Cardan to be trapped forever as a serpent.

I wonder if he's in pain now. I wonder what it feels like to have corruption spread from your skin. I wonder if he has enough consciousness to feel humiliation being bridled before a Court that once loved him. Whether hate will grow in his heart. Hate for them. Hate for me.

I might have grown into something else, a High King as monstrous as Dain. And if I did—if I fulfilled that prophecy—I ought *to be stopped. And I believe that you would stop me.*

Madoc, Lord Jarel, and Lady Nore plan to accompany me to the banquet, where I am to announce our alliance. I will have to establish my authority and hold it through the evening, a tricky proposition. The Court of Teeth are both presumptuous and sneering. I will look weak if I allow that to be directed at me —yet it would be unwise to risk our alliance by returning it. As for Madoc, I don't doubt he will be full of fatherly advice, pushing me into the role of sullen

daughter if I reject it too vociferously. But if I cannot stop them from getting the upper hand with me, then everything I've done, everything I've planned, will be for nothing.

With all that in mind, I throw back my shoulders and head to where our banquet will be held.

I keep my head high as I walk across the mossy grass. My dress flows behind me. The strands of silver woven through my hair shine under the stars. Following me comes the moth-winged page, holding up my train. The royal guard flank me at a respectful distance.

I spot Lord Roiben standing near an apple tree, his half-moon sword gleaming in a polished sheath. His companion, Kaye, is in a green dress very close to the color of her skin. Queen Annet is speaking with Lord Severin. Randalin is drinking cup after cup of wine. All of them seem subdued. They have seen a curse unfold, and if they are still here, it is because they intend to fight on the morrow.

Only one of us can tell them lies. I recall Cardan's words to me the last time we spoke to the rulers of the low Courts.

But tonight it is not lies that I need. And it is not precisely the truth, either.

At the sight of me with Madoc and the rulers of the Court of Teeth, a hush goes over the gathered company. All those inkdrop eyes look in my direction. All those hungry, beautiful faces, turning to me as though I were a wounded lamb in a world of lions.

"Lords and ladies and denizens of Elfhame," I speak into the silence. Then I hesitate. I am as unused to giving speeches as anyone could be. "As a child in the High Court, I grew up with wild, impossible wonder tales—of curses and monsters. Tales that even here, in Faerie, were too incredible to be believed. But now our High King is a serpent, and we are all plunged into a wonder tale.

"Cardan destroyed the crown because he wanted to be a different kind of ruler and to have a different kind of reign. At least in one way, that has already been accomplished. Madoc and Queen Suren of the Court of Teeth laid down their arms. We met and hammered out the terms of a truce."

A low murmur goes through the crowd.

I do not look to my side. Madoc must not like that I am characterizing this alliance as *my* triumph, and Lord Jarel and Lady Nore must hate my treating their daughter as though she is the member of the Court of Teeth owed deference.

I go on. “I have invited them here tonight to feast with us, and tomorrow we will all meet on the field, not to battle, but to tame the serpent and end the threat to Elfhame. Together.”

There is scattered, uncertain applause.

With my whole heart, I wish Cardan was here. I can almost imagine him lounging on a chair, giving me pointers on speechmaking. It would have annoyed me so much, and now, thinking of it, there’s a cold pit of longing in my stomach.

I miss him, and the pain of it is a yawning chasm, one into which I yearn to let myself fall.

I lift my goblet, and all around, goblets and glasses and horns are raised. “Let us drink to Cardan, our High King, who sacrificed himself for his people. Who broke the hold of the Blood Crown. Let us drink to those alliances that have proved to be as firm as the bedrock of the isles of Elfhame. And let us drink to the promise of peace.”

When I tip back my goblet, everyone drinks with me. It seems as though something has shifted in the air. I hope it’s enough.

“A fine speech, daughter,” Madoc says. “But nowhere in it was my promised reward.”

“To make you first among my councilors? And yet already you lecture me.” I fix him with a steady look. “Until we have the serpent bridled, our deal is not yet struck.”

He frowns. I do not wait for him to argue the point but step away and go to a small knot of the Folk from the Court of Teeth.

“Lady Nore.” She looks surprised that I’ve addressed her, as though it ought to be presumption on my part. “You have not perhaps met Lady Asha, mother to the High King.”

“I suppose not,” she agrees. “Although—”

I take her arm and steer her to where Lady Asha stands, surrounded by her favorite courtiers. Lady Asha looks alarmed by my approach and even more alarmed when I begin speaking.

“I have heard that you wish for a new role in the Court,” I say to her. “I am thinking of making you an ambassador to the Court of Teeth, so it seemed useful for you to meet Lady Nore.”

There is absolutely no truth to what I’m saying. But I want Lady Asha to know that I have heard of her plotting and that if she crosses me, I am capable of

sending her away from the comforts she prizes most. And it seems like a fitting punishment for both of them to be afflicted with each other.

"Would you really force me so far from my son?" she asks.

"If you'd prefer to remain here and have a hand in caring for the serpent," I say, "you have only to say so."

Lady Asha looks as though what she'd *really* prefer is to stab me in the throat. I turn away from her and Lady Nore. "Enjoy your conversation." Maybe they will. They both hate me. That gives them at least one thing in common.

A blur of dishes is brought out by servants. Tender stalks of fern, walnuts wrapped in rose petals, wine bottles choked with herbal infusions, tiny birds roasted whole with honey. As I stare out at the Folk, it seems as though the gardens are spinning around me. A strange sense of unreality intrudes. Dizzily, I look around for one of my sisters, for someone from the Court of Shadows. Even Fand.

"Your Majesty," comes a voice. It is Lord Roiben at my elbow. My chest constricts. I am not sure I am able to project authority to him, of all people, right now.

"It was good of you to stay," I say. "After Cardan broke the crown, I wasn't sure you would."

He nods. "I never cared much for him," he says, staring down at me with his gray eyes, pale as river water. "It was you who persuaded me to pledge to the crown in the first place, and you who brokered peace after the Undersea broke their treaty."

By killing Balekin. I can hardly forget.

"And I might have fought for you regardless if for no other reason than a mortal Queen of Faerie cannot help but delight many people I hold dear and annoy many people I dislike. But after what Cardan did in the great hall, I understand why you were willing to take mad gamble after mad gamble to put him on the throne, and I would have fought until the breath left my body."

I never expected such a speech from him. It grounds me to the spot.

Roiben touches a bracelet at his wrist, with woven green threads running through it. No, not thread. Hair. "He was willing to break the Blood Crown and trust in the loyalty of his subjects instead of compel it. He's the true High King of Faerie."

I open my mouth to reply when, across the expanse of grass, I see Nicasia in a shimmering gown the silver of fish scales weaving between courtiers and rulers.

And I notice Roiben's consort, Kaye, moving toward her.

“Um,” I say. “Your, um, girlfriend is about to—”

He turns to look just in time for both of us to see Kaye punch Nicasia right in the face. She stumbles into another courtier and then hits the ground. The pixie shakes her hand as though she hurt her knuckles.

Nicasia’s selkie guards run toward her. Roiben immediately begins moving through the crowd, which parts for him. I try to follow, but Madoc blocks my way.

“A queen does not race toward a fight like a schoolgirl,” he says, grabbing hold of my shoulder. I am not so distracted by annoyance not to see the opportunity before me. I pull out of his grip, taking three strands of his hair with me.

A redheaded knight shoves her way between Kaye and Nicasia’s selkie guards. I don’t know her, but by the time Roiben gets there, it seems clear that everyone is threatening to duel everyone else.

“Get out of my way,” I growl at Madoc, then take off at a run. I ignore anyone who tries to speak with me. Maybe I look ridiculous, holding up my gown to my knees, but I don’t care. I certainly look ridiculous when I tuck something into my cleavage.

Nicasia’s jaw is red, and her throat is flushed. I have to choke down a wholly inappropriate laugh.

“You best not defend a pixie,” she tells me grandly.

The redheaded knight is mortal, wearing the livery of the Alderking’s Court. She’s got a bloody nose, which I assume means that she and the selkies already got into it. Lord Roiben looks ready to draw the blade at his hip. Since he was just talking about fighting until the breath left his body, that’s something I’d rather avoid.

Kaye is wearing a more revealing gown than she did the last time I saw her. It shows a scar that starts at her throat and runs down over her chest. It looks half like a cut, half like a burn, and definitely something it makes sense for her to be angry about. “I don’t need any defending,” she says. “I can handle my own business.”

“You’re lucky all she did was hit you,” I tell Nicasia. Her presence makes my pulse thrum with nerves. I can’t help remembering what it was to be her captive in the Undersea. I turn to Kaye. “But this is over now. Understood?”

Roiben puts his hand on her shoulder.

“I guess,” Kaye says, and then stomps off in her big boots. Roiben waits a moment, but I shake my head. Then he follows his consort.

Nicasia touches fingers to her jaw, regarding me carefully.

"I see you got my note," I say.

"And I see you are consorting with the enemy," she returns with a glance in Madoc's direction. "Come with me."

"Where?" I ask.

"Anywhere no one can hear us."

We walk off together through the gardens, leaving both our guard behind. She grabs hold of my hand. "Is it true? Cardan is under a curse? He is transformed into a monster whose scales have broken the spears of your Folk."

I give a tight nod.

To my astonishment, she sinks down to her knees.

"What are you doing?" I say, aghast.

"Please," she says, her head bent. "Please. You must try to break the curse. I know that you are the queen by right and that you may not want him back, but —"

If anything could have increased my astonishment, it was that. "You think that I'd—"

"I didn't know you, before," she says, the anguish clear in her voice. There is a hitch in her breath that comes with weeping. "I thought you were just some mortal."

I have to bite my tongue at that, but I don't interrupt her.

"When you became his seneschal, I told myself that he wanted you for your lying tongue. Or because you'd become biddable, although you never were before. I should have believed you when you told him he didn't know the least of what you could do.

"While you were in exile, I got more of the story out of him. I know you don't believe this, but Cardan and I were friends before we were lovers, before Locke. He was my first friend when I came here from the Undersea. And we *were* friends, even after everything. I hate that he loves you."

"He hated it, too," I say with a laugh that sounds more brittle than I'd like.

Nicasia fixes me with a long look. "No, he didn't."

To that, I can only be silent.

"He frightens the Folk, but he's not what you think he is," Nicasia says. "Do you remember the servants that Balekin had? The human servants?"

I nod mutely. Of course I remember. I will never forget Sophie and her pockets full of stones.

“They’d go missing sometimes, and there were rumors that Cardan hurt them, but it wasn’t true. He’d return them to the mortal world.”

I admit, I’m surprised. “Why?”

She throws up a hand. “I don’t know! Perhaps to annoy his brother. But you’re human, so I thought you’d like that he did it. And he sent you a gown. For the coronation.”

I remember it—the ball gown in the colors of night, with the stark outlines of trees stitched on it and the crystals for stars. A thousand times more beautiful than the dress I commissioned. I had thought perhaps it came from Prince Dain, since it was his coronation and I’d sworn to be his creature when I joined the Court of Shadows.

“He never told you, did he?” Nicasia says. “So see? Those are two nice things about him you didn’t know. And I saw the way you used to look at him when you didn’t think anyone was watching you.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, embarrassed despite the fact that we were lovers, and wed, and it should hardly be a secret that we like each other.

“So promise me,” she says. “Promise me you’ll help him.”

I think of the golden bridle, about the future the stars predicted. “I don’t know *how* to break the curse,” I say, all the tears I haven’t shed welling up in my eyes. “If I could, do you think I would be at this stupid banquet? Tell me what I must slay, what I must steal, tell me the riddle I must solve or the hag I must trick. Only tell me the way, and I will do it, no matter the danger, no matter the hardship, no matter the cost.” My voice breaks.

She gives me a steady look. Whatever else I might think of her, she really does care for Cardan.

And as tears roll over my cheeks, to her astonishment, I think she realizes I do, too.

Much good it does him.

When we finish talking, I go back to the banquet and find the new Alderking. He looks surprised to see me. Beside him is the mortal knight with the bloody nose. A red-haired human I recognize as Severin’s consort is stuffing her nose with cotton. The consort and the knight are twins, I realize. Not identical, like Taryn and me, but twins all the same. Twin humans in Faerie. And neither of them looking particularly discomfited by it.

“I need something from you,” I tell Severin.

He makes his bow. “Of course, my queen. Whatever is mine is yours.”

That night, I lie on Cardan’s enormous bed in his enormous bedchambers. I spread out, kick at the covers.

I look at the golden bridle sitting on a chair beside me, glowing in the low lamplight.

If I got it on the serpent, I would have him with me always. Once bridled, I could bring him here. He could curl up on the rug in this very room, and though it might make me as much a monster as he is, at least I wouldn’t be alone.

Eventually I sleep.

In my dreams, Cardan the snake looms over me, his black scales gleaming.

“I love you,” I say, and then he devours me.

You're not healed enough," Tatterfell gripes, poking my scar with her sharp fingers. The imp has been seeing to me since I got out of bed, getting me ready to face the serpent as though I was going to another banquet, and complaining the whole way. "Madoc nearly cut you in half not so long ago."

"Does it bother you that you were sworn to him, but you're still here with me?" I ask as she finishes the tight braid on top of my head. The sides are pulled back, and the rest of it is pinned into a bun. No ornamentation in my ears or around my throat, of course, nothing that can be grabbed.

"This is where he sent me," Tatterfell says, taking a brush from the table where she has laid out her tools and touching it to a pot of black ash. "Maybe he regrets it. After all, I could be scolding him right now, instead of you."

That makes me smile.

Tatterfell paints my face, shadowing my eyes and reddening my lips.

There's a knock on the door, and then Taryn and Vivi come in. "You won't believe what we found in the treasury," Vivi says.

"I thought treasuries were just full of gems and gold and stuff." I recall, ages back, Cardan's promise that he would give the contents of Balekin's treasury to the Court of Shadows if they would only betray me and release him. It's an odd feeling, remembering how panicked I felt then, how charming he was, and how I hated it.

Tatterfell snorts as the Roach comes in, pulling a chest behind him. “There’s no keeping your sisters out of trouble.”

His skin has returned to its normal deep green, and he looks thin, but well. It’s an immense relief to see him up and moving so quickly. I wonder how he was recruited to help my sisters, but I wonder more what the Bomb said to him. There is a new kind of joy in his face. It lives in the corners of his mouth, where a smile hovers, and in the brightness of his eyes.

It hurts to look at.

Taryn grins. “We found armor. Glorious armor. For you.”

“For a queen,” Vivi says. “Which, you may recall, there hasn’t been in a little while.”

“It may well have belonged to Mab herself,” Taryn goes on.

“You’re really building this up,” I tell them.

Vivi leans down to unlock the chest. She draws out armor of a fine scale mail, worked so that it appears like a fall of miniature metal ivy leaves. I gasp at the sight of it. It truly is the most beautiful armor I’ve ever seen. It appears ancient, and the workmanship is distinct, nothing like Grimsen’s. It’s a relief to know that other great smiths came before him and that others will follow.

“I knew you’d like it,” Taryn says, grinning.

“And I have something you’ll like almost as well,” the Roach says. Reaching into his bag, he takes out three strands of what looks like silver thread.

I tuck it into my pocket, beside the hair I plucked from Madoc’s head.

Vivi is too busy taking out more items from the chest to notice. Boots covered in curved plates of metal. Bracers in a pattern of briars. Shoulder plates of more leaves, curled up at the edges. And a helm that resembles a crown of golden branches with berries gathered on either side.

“Well, even if the serpent bites off your head,” says Tatterfell, “the rest of you will still look good.”

“That’s the spirit,” I tell her.

The army of Elfhame assembles and readies itself to march. Whippet-thin faerie steeds, swampy water horses, reindeer with jutting antlers, and massive toads are all being saddled. Some will even be armored.

Archers line up with their elf-shot, with sleep-poisoned arrows and enormous bows. Knights ready themselves. I see Grima Mog across the grass, standing in a

small knot of redcaps. They are passing around a carafe of blood, taking swigs and dotting their caps. Swarms of pixies with small poisoned darts fly through the air.

"We'll be prepared," Grima Mog explains, walking over, "in the event that the bridle doesn't work the way they claim. Or in case they don't like what happens next." Taking in my armor and the borrowed sword strapped to my back, she smiles, showing me her blood-reddened teeth. Then she places a hand over her heart. "High Queen."

I try to give her a grin, but I know it is a sickly one. Anxiety chews at my gut.

Two paths are before me, but only one leads to victory.

I have been Madoc's protégé and Dain's creature. I don't know how to win any other way but theirs. It is no recipe for being a hero, but it is a recipe for success. I know how to drive a knife through my own hand. I know how to hate and be hated. And I know how to win the day, provided I am willing to sacrifice everything good in me for it.

I said that if I couldn't be better than my enemies, then I would become worse. Much, much worse.

Take three hairs from your own head and knot them around the bridle. You will be bound together.

Lord Jarel thought to trick me. He thought to keep the word of power to himself, to use it only after I bridled the serpent, and then to control us both. I am sure Madoc doesn't know Lord Jarel's scheme, which suggests that part of it will involve murdering Madoc.

But it is a scheme that can be turned on its head. I have tied their hair to the golden bridle, and it will not be me who is bound with the serpent. Once the serpent is bridled, Madoc and Lord Jarel will become my creatures, as surely as Cardan was once mine. As surely as Cardan will be mine again with golden straps digging into his scales.

And if the serpent grows in monstrousness and corruption, if it poisons the land of Elfhame itself, then let me be the queen of monsters. Let me rule over that blackened land with my redcap father as a puppet by my side. Let me be feared and never again afraid.

Only out of his spilled blood can a great ruler rise.

Let me have everything I ever wanted, everything I ever dreamed, and eternal misery along with it. Let me live on with an ice shard through my heart.

"I have looked at the stars," says Baphen. For a moment, my mind is still too lost in my own wild imaginings to focus. His deep blue robes fly behind him in

the early-afternoon breeze. “But they will not speak to me. When the future is obscured, it means an event will permanently reshape the future for good or ill. Nothing can be seen until the event is concluded.”

“No pressure, then,” I mutter.

The Bomb emerges from the shadows. “The serpent has been spotted,” she says. “Near the shoreline by the Crooked Forest. We must go quickly before we lose it again.”

“Remember the formation,” Grima Mog calls to her troops. “We drive from the north. Madoc’s people will hold the south, and the Court of Teeth, the west. Keep your distance. Our goal is to herd the creature into our queen’s loving arms.”

The scales of my new armor chime together, making a musical sound. I am handed up onto a high black steed. Grima Mog is seated on an enormous armored buck.

“Is this your first battle?” she asks me.

I nod.

“If fighting breaks out, focus on what’s in front of you. Fight *your* fight,” she tells me. “Let someone else worry about theirs.”

I nod again, watching Madoc’s army set off to take up its position. First come his own soldiers, handpicked and stolen away from the standing army of Elfhame. Then there are those low Courts that took up his banner. And, of course, the Court of Teeth, carrying icy weapons. Many of them seem to have frost-tipped skin, some as blue as the dead. I do not relish the idea of fighting them, today or any other day.

The Court of Termites rides behind Grima Mog. It’s easy to pick out Roiben’s salt-white hair. He is on the back of a kelpie, and when I look over, he salutes me. Beside him are the Alderking’s troops. Severin’s mortal consort isn’t with him; instead, he’s riding beside the red-haired mortal knight whose nose was bloodied by Nicasia’s selkie guards. She looks disturbingly chipper.

Back at the palace, Vivi, Oriana, Heather, and Oak wait for us with a retainer of guards, the better part of the Council, and many courtiers from Courts both low and high. They will watch from the parapets.

My grip tightens on the golden bridle.

“Cheer up,” Grima Mog says, seeing my face. She adjusts her hat, stiffened with layers of blood. “We go to glory.”

Through the trees we ride, and I cannot help thinking that when I pictured knighthood, I pictured something like this. Facing down magical monsters, clad

in armor, sword at my side. But like so many imaginings, it was absent all the horror.

A screech carries through the air from a denser patch of woods up ahead. Grima Mog gives a sign, and the armies of Elfhame stop marching and spread out. Only I ride on, weaving around dead tree after dead tree until I see the black coils of the serpent's body perhaps thirty feet from where I stand. My horse shies back, chuffing.

Holding the bridle, I swing down from its back and move closer to the monstrous creature that was once Cardan. It has grown in size, longer now than one of Madoc's ships, head large enough that were it to open its mouth, a single fang would be half the size of the sword on my back.

It's absolutely terrifying.

I force my feet to move across the wilted and blackened grass. Beyond the serpent, I see the banners with Madoc's crest fluttering in the breeze.

"Cardan," I say in a whisper. The golden net of the bridle shines in my hands.

As if in answer, the serpent draws back, neck curving in a swinging movement as though evaluating how best to strike.

"It's Jude," I say, and my voice cracks. "Jude. You like me, remember? You trust me."

The serpent explodes into motion, sliding fast over the grass in my direction, closing the distance between us. Soldiers scatter. Horses rear up. Toads hop into the shelter of the forest, ignoring their riders. Kelpies run for the sea.

I lift the bridle, having nothing else in my hands to defend myself with. I prepare to throw. But the serpent pauses perhaps ten feet from where I am standing, winding around itself.

Looking at me with those gold-tipped eyes.

I tremble all over. My palms sweat.

I know what I must do if I want to vanquish my enemies, but I no longer want to do it.

This close to the serpent, I can think only of the bridle sinking into Cardan's skin, of his being trapped forever. Having him under my control was once such a compelling thought. It gave me such a raw rush of power when he was sworn to me, when he had to obey me for a year and a day. I felt that if I could control everything and everyone, then nothing could hurt me.

I take another step toward the serpent. And then another. This close, I am stunned all over again by the creature's sheer size. I raise a wary hand and place it against the black scales. They feel dry and cool against my skin.

Its golden eyes have no answer, but I think of Cardan lying beside me on the floor of the royal rooms.

I think of his quicksilver smile.

I think of how he would hate to be trapped like this. How unfair it would be for me to keep him this way and call it love.

You already know how to end the curse.

"I do love you," I whisper. "I will always love you."

I tuck the golden bridle into my belt.

Two paths are before me, but only one leads to victory.

But I don't want to win like this. Perhaps I will never live without fear, perhaps power will slip from my grasp, perhaps the pain of losing him will hurt more than I can bear.

And yet, if I love him, there's only one choice.

I draw the borrowed sword at my back. Heartsworn, which can cut through anything. I asked Severin for the blade and carried it into battle, because no matter how I denied it, some part of me knew what I would choose.

The golden eyes of the serpent are steady, but there are surprised sounds from the assembled Folk. I hear Madoc's roar.

This wasn't supposed to be how things ended.

I close my eyes, but I cannot keep them that way. In one movement, I swing Heartsworn in a shining arc at the serpent's head. The blade falls, cutting through scales, through flesh and bone. Then the serpent's head is at my feet, golden eyes dulling.

Blood is everywhere. The body of the serpent gives a terrible coiling shudder, then goes limp. I sheath Heartsworn with trembling hands. I am shaking all over, shaking so hard that I fall to my knees in the blackened grass, in the carpet of blood.

I hear Lord Jarel shout something at me, but I can't hear it.

I think I might be screaming.

The Folk are running toward me. I hear the clang of steel and the hiss of arrows soaring through the air. It seems to come from very far away.

All that is loud in my ears is the curse Valerian spoke before he died. *May your hands always be stained with blood. May death be your only companion.*

"You ought to have taken what we offered," Lord Jarel says, swinging his spear down toward me. "Your reign will be very short, mortal queen."

Then Grima Mog is there on her stag, taking the weight of his blade. Their weapons slam together, ringing with the force of the impact. "First I am going to

kill you," she tells him. "And then I am going to eat you."

Two black arrows fly out of the trees, embedding themselves in Lord Jarel's throat. He slides off his horse as a cry goes up from the Court of Teeth. I catch a flash of the Bomb's white hair.

Grima Mog whirls away, battling three knights from the Court of Teeth. She must have known them once, must have commanded them, but she fights them just the same.

There are more cries all around me. And the sounds of battle ebbing.

From the shoreline, I hear a horn.

Out past the black rocks, the water is frothing. From the depths, merfolk and selkies rise, their shining scales catching the sunlight. Nicasia is rising with them, seated on the back of a shark.

"The Undersea honors its treaty with the land and with the queen," she calls, her voice carrying across the field. "Lay down your arms."

A moment later, the armies of the Undersea are rushing the shore.

Then Madoc is standing in front of me. His cheek and part of his forehead are painted in gore. There is a glee in his face, a terrible joy. Redcaps are born for this, for bloodshed and violence and murder. I think some part of him delights in being able to share this with me, even now. "Stand up."

I have spent most of my life answering to his orders. I push myself to my feet, my hand going to the golden bridle at my belt, the one tied with his hair, the one I could have used to bind him and the one I can bind him with still. "I am not going to fight you." My voice sounds so distant. "Though I would not delight to see the straps sink into your skin, neither would I mourn."

"Enough blustering," he says. "You've already won. Look."

He takes me by the shoulders and turns me so that I can see where the great body of the serpent lies. A jolt of horror goes through me, and I try to wrench out of his grip. And then I notice the fighting has ebbed, the Folk are staring. From within the body of the creature emanates a glow.

And then, through that, Cardan steps out. Cardan, naked and covered in blood.

Alive.

Only out of his spilled blood can a great ruler rise.

And all around, people go to their knees. Grima Mog kneels. Lord Roiben kneels. Even those who moments before were intent on murder seem overcome. Nicasia looks on from the sea as all of Elfhame bows to the High King, restored and reborn.

“I will bend my head to you,” Madoc says to me under his breath. “And only you.”

Cardan takes a step forward, and little cracks appear from his footfalls. Fissures in the very earth. He speaks with a boom that echoes through everyone gathered there. “The curse is broken. The king is returned.”

He’s every bit as terrifying as any serpent.

I don’t care. I run into his arms.

Cardan's fingers dig into my back. He's trembling, and whether it is from ebbing magic or horror, I am not sure. But he holds me as though I am the only solid thing in the world.

Soldiers approach, and Cardan lets go abruptly. His jaw sets. He waves away a knight who proffers his cloak, despite being clad only in blood.

"I haven't worn anything in days," the High King drawls, and if there is something brittle in his eyes, nearly everyone is too awed to notice. "I don't see why I ought to start now."

"Modesty?" I force out, playing along, surprised he can joke about the curse, or anything.

He gives me a dazzling, insouciant smile. The kind of smile you can hide behind. "Every part of me is a delight."

My chest hurts, looking at him. I feel like I can't breathe. Though he is in front of me, the pain of losing him hasn't faded.

"Your Majesty," Grima Mog says, addressing me. "Do I have leave to chain your father?"

I hesitate, thinking of the moment when I confronted him with the golden bridle. *You've already won.*

"Yes," Cardan says. "Chain him."

A carriage is brought, wheels wobbling over the rocks. Grima Mog shouts orders. Two generals clasp manacles around Madoc's wrists and ankles, the heavy chains clanking with even the slightest movement. Archers keep arrows trained on him as they lead him away.

His army is surrendering, taking oaths of submission. I hear the whir of wings, the clank of armor, and cries from the wounded. Redcaps freshen the pigment of their hats. A few Folk feast on the dead. There's smoke in the air, mingling with the scents of the sea and of blood and moss. The aftermath of even a brief battle is all dwindling adrenaline, bandages, and feting the victors.

The revel will have already begun back at the palace and will last far longer than the fighting.

Inside the carriage, Cardan slumps. I stare at him, at the blood drying in tide lines over his body and crusting in his curls like tiny garnets. I force myself to look out the window instead.

"How long have I—" He hesitates.

"Not even three days," I tell him. "Barely any time at all." I do not mention how long it has seemed.

Nor do I say how he might have been trapped as a serpent for all time, bridled and bound. Or dead.

He could be dead.

Then the carriage draws up, and we are chivied out. Servants have brought an enormous velvet cloak for Cardan, and this time he accepts it, wrapping it around his shoulders as we make our way through the chilly underground halls.

"You will want to bathe perhaps," Randalin says, an understandable sentiment.

"I want to see the throne," says Cardan.

No one is inclined to gainsay him.

The brugh is full of turned-over tables and rotting fruit. A crack runs through the ground to the split throne, with its wilted flowers. Cardan spreads his hands, and the earth heals along the seam, rock and stone bubbling up to fill it back in. Then he twists his fingers, and the divided throne grows anew, blooming with briars, sprouting into two separate thrones where there was once only one.

"Do you like it?" he asks me, which seems a little like asking if someone enjoys the crown of stars they conjured from the sky.

"Impressive," I choke out.

Seemingly satisfied, he finally allows Randalin to guide us to the royal chambers, which are full of servants, generals, and most of the Living Council.

A bath is drawn for the High King. A carafe of wine is brought, along with an ornate goblet studded with cabochons. Fala sings a song about the king of snakes, and Cardan seems both charmed and horrified by all of it.

Unwilling to strip off my armor in front of all these Folk and sticky with blood, I slip out and go to my old rooms.

But when I get there, I find Heather. She stands up from the couch, holding an enormous tome. The pink of her hair is faded, but everything else about her looks vibrant. “Congratulations, if that’s not too weird of a thing to say. I don’t know how to talk about fights, but I hear you won.”

“We won,” I confirm, and smile.

She tugs at a double strand of very poorly strung rowan berries around her neck. “Vee made me this. For the after-party.” Heather seems to notice what I am wearing for the first time. “That’s not your blood—”

“No,” I say. “I’m fine. Just gross.”

She nods slowly.

“And Cardan,” I say. “He’s fine, too.”

The tome tumbles out of her hand and onto the couch. “He’s not a big snake anymore?”

“No,” I say. “But I think I might be hyperventilating. That’s what you call it, right? Breathing too fast. Dizzy.”

“Nobody in this place knows anything about human medicine, do they?” She walks over and starts working on my armor. “Let’s get this off you, and see if that helps.”

“Talk to me,” I say. “Tell me another fairy tale. Tell me something.”

“Okay,” she says, trying to figure out how to undo the armor. “I took your advice and talked to Vee. Finally. I told her that I didn’t want my memories to be taken away and that I was sorry I let her make the promise.”

“Was she glad?” I help Heather with one of the clasps.

“We had a huge fight. Screaming fight,” she says. “With a lot of crying, too.”

“Oh,” I say.

“Do you remember the fairy tale with the snake who has the helicopter parents and marries the princess?”

“Helicopter?” I echo. I did fall asleep at the end, so maybe I missed that part.

“When the boy’s snakeskin is burned, the princess had to earn him back by going on a quest. Well, I told Vee she has to go on a quest. She has to meet me all over again and do it right this time. Tell me the truth from the start. And convince me to love her.”

“Damn.” The last of my armor comes off, clanking to the floor, and I realize that her talking has distracted me enough for my breathing to return to normal. “That is some serious fairy-tale business. A *quest*.”

Heather reaches out her hand to take mine. “If she succeeds, all my memories come back. But if not, then tonight’s the last time I am going to see you.”

“I hope you drink the cellars dry at the revel,” I say to her, pulling her into a tight embrace. “But more than that, I hope Vee is good enough to win your hand again.”

The door opens, and Oriana comes in. Upon seeing me, she looks panicked. Immediately, she bows low, pressing her forehead nearly to the floor.

“You don’t have to do that,” I say, and she fixes me with a sharp look. I can see she has *a lot* of thoughts about my behavior as High Queen, and there’s a moment of sharp satisfaction that she can’t tell me any of them without breaking her own rules of what’s appropriate.

She rises from her bow. “I hope that you will grant mercy to your father. For your brother’s sake, if not for your own.”

“I’ve already been merciful,” I say, and lifting my armor, I flee into the hallway.

I should not have left the royal chambers. It was an old impulse, to leave Cardan to rule while I operated from the shadows. And it was a relief to be away from all those staring eyes. But far from Cardan, everything has taken on a tinge of unreality, and I worry that somehow the curse was never broken, that all this is the fantasy of a feverish mind. I hurriedly retrace my steps through the hall, clad in only the padded gambeson and leg coverings under my armor.

When I get back, I find Cardan gone, along with all the dignitaries. The bathwater is still warm, and there are candles still burning, but the rooms are empty.

“I refilled it,” says Tatterfell, coming out of I-don’t-know-where and startling me. “Get in. You’re a mess.”

“Where’s Cardan?” I ask, starting to strip off the last of my clothes.

“The brugh. Where else?” she says. “You’re the one who’s late. But as the hero of the hour, that’s all to the good. I am going to make you into a vision.”

“Sounds like a lot of work on your part,” I tell her, but climb obediently into the tub, disturbing primrose petals floating there. The hot water feels good on my sore muscles. I let myself sink under it. The problem with coming through something terrible and big is that afterward, you’re left feeling all the feelings that you shoved down and pushed away. For many long days, I have been

terrified, and now, when I ought to be feeling great, what I want to do is hide under a table in the brugh with Cardan until I can finally convince myself he's all right.

And maybe make out with his face, if he's feeling up to that.

I surface from the water and wipe my hair back from my eyes. Tatterfell hands me a cloth. "Scrub the blood off your knuckles," she instructs.

Once more, she braids my hair into horns, this time threaded with gold. She has a bronze velvet tunic for me. Over it, she puts a bronze leather coat with a high curled collar and a cape-like train that blows in even the slightest wind. And last, bronze gloves with wide cuffs.

Dressed in such finery, it would have been difficult to slip into the brugh unnoticed, even if horns didn't blare at my entrance.

"The High Queen of Elfhame, Jude Duarte," announces a page in a carrying voice.

I spot Cardan, sitting at the head of the high table. Even from across the room, I can feel the intensity of his gaze.

Long tables have been set up for a proper feast. Each platter is heavy with food: great globes of fruit, hazelnuts, bread stuffed with dates. Honey wine perfumes the air.

I can hear performers competing to get the lyrics right on their new compositions, many of them in honor of the serpent king. At least one is in my honor, however:

Our queen sheathed her sword and closed her eyes,

And said, "I thought the snake would be of larger size."

A fresh batch of servants come from the kitchens, carrying trays heaped with pale meat in different preparations—grilled and poached in oil, roasted and stewed. It takes me a moment to recognize what I am looking at. It's serpent meat. Meat cut from the body of the enormous serpent that had been their High King and might give them a measure of his magic. I look at it and feel the overwhelming disorientation of being mortal. Some faerie ways will never not horrify me.

I hope that Cardan is undisturbed. Certainly, he appears blithesome, laughing as courtiers heap their plates.

"I always supposed I would be delicious," I hear him say, although I note that he does not take any of the meat for himself.

Again, I imagine ducking underneath the table and hiding there, as I did when I was a child. As I did after the bloody coronation, with him.

But I go to the high table instead and find my place, which is, of course, at the head of the opposite end. We stare at each other across the expanse of silver and cloth and candles.

Then he rises, and all across the brugh, the Folk fall silent. “Tomorrow we must deal with all that has befallen us,” he says, lifting a goblet high. “But tonight let us remember our triumph, our trickery, and our delight in one another.”

We all toast to that.

There are songs—a seemingly endless array of songs—and dishes enough that even a mortal like myself can eat my fill. I watch Heather and Vivi weave through the tables to dance. I spot the Roach and the Bomb, sitting in the shadows of the re-formed thrones. He is tossing grapes into her mouth and never missing, not once. Grima Mog is discussing something with Lord Roiben, half her plate heaped with snake and half her plate heaped with another meat that I do not recognize. Nicasia sits in a place of honor, not far from the high table, her subjects around her. I spot Taryn near the musicians, telling a story with great sweeps of her hands. I see the Ghost, too, watching her.

“Your pardon,” someone says, and I see the Minister of Keys, Randalin, at Cardan’s shoulder.

“Councilor,” Cardan says, leaning back against the table, his posture the easy languor of someone who’s already in his cups. “Were you hoping for one of these little honey cakes? I could have passed them down the table.”

“There’s the matter of the prisoners—Madoc, his army, what remains of the Court of Teeth,” Randalin says. “And many other matters we were hoping to take up with you.”

“Tomorrow,” Cardan insists. “Or the next day. Or perhaps next week.” And with that, he rises, takes a long drink from his goblet, sets it down on the table, and walks to where I sit.

“Will you dance?” he asks, presenting his hand.

“You may remember that I am not particularly accomplished at it,” I say, rising. The last time we danced was the night of Prince Dain’s coronation, just before everything went sideways. He had been very, very drunk.

You really hate me, don’t you? he’d asked.

Almost as much as you hate me, I’d returned.

He draws me down to where fiddle players are exhorting everyone to dance faster and faster, to whirl and spin and jump. His hands cover mine.

“I don’t know what to apologize for first,” I say. “Cutting off your head or hesitating so long to do it. I didn’t want to lose what little there was left of you. And I can’t quite think past how wonderous it is that you’re alive.”

“You don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear those words,” he says. “You don’t want me dead.”

“If you joke about this, I am going to—”

“Kill me?” he asks, raising both black brows.

I think I might hate him after all.

Then Cardan takes my hands in his and pulls me away from the other dancers, toward the secret chamber he showed me before, behind the dais. It is as I remember it, its walls thick with moss, a low couch resting beneath gently glowing mushrooms.

“I only know how to be cruel or to laugh when I am discomposed,” he says, and sits down on the couch.

I let go of him and remain standing. I promised myself I would do this, if I ever had the chance again. I promised I would do this the first moment I could.

“I love you,” I say, the words coming out in an unintelligible rush.

Cardan looks taken aback. Or possibly I spoke so fast he’s not even sure what I said. “You need not say it out of pity,” he says finally, with great deliberateness. “Or because I was under a curse. I have asked you to lie to me in the past, in this very room, but I would beg you not to lie now.”

My cheeks heat at the memory of those lies.

“I have not made myself easy to love,” he says, and I hear the echo of his mother’s words in his.

When I imagined telling him, I thought I would say the words, and it would be like pulling off a bandage—painful and swift. But I didn’t think he would doubt me. “I first started liking you when we went to talk to the rulers of the low Courts,” I say. “You were *funny*, which was weird. And when we went to Hollow Hall, you were *clever*. I kept remembering how you’d been the one to get us out of the brugh after Dain’s coronation, right before I put that knife to your throat.”

He doesn’t try to interrupt, so I have no choice but to barrel on.

“After I tricked you into being the High King,” I say. “I thought once you hated me, I could go back to hating you. But I didn’t. And I felt so stupid. I thought I would get my heart broken. I thought it was a weakness that you would use against me. But then you saved me from the Undersea when it would have been much more convenient to just leave me to rot. After that, I started to hope

my feelings were returned. But then there was the exile—" I take a ragged breath. "I hid a lot, I guess. I thought if I didn't, if I let myself love you, I would burn up like a match. Like the whole matchbook."

"But now you've explained it," he says. "And you do love me."

"I love you," I confirm.

"Because I am *clever* and *funny*," he says, smiling. "You didn't mention my handsomeness."

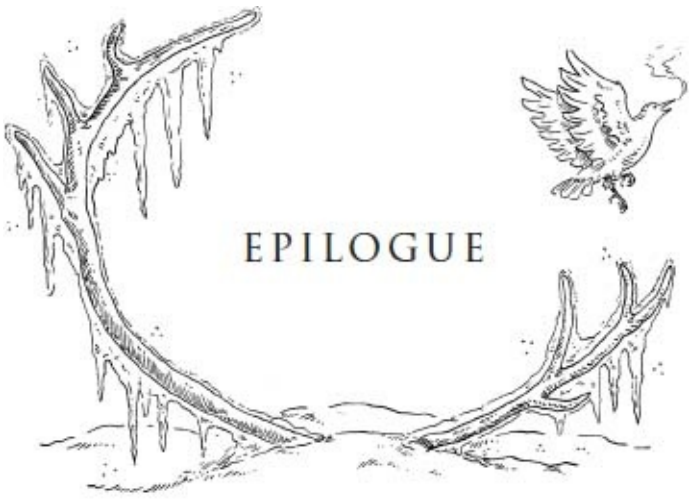
"Or your deliciousness," I say. "Although those are both good qualities."

He pulls me to him, so that we're both lying down on the couch. I look down at the blackness of his eyes and the softness of his mouth. I wipe a fleck of dried blood from the top of one pointed ear. "What was it like?" I ask. "Being a serpent."

He hesitates. "It was like being trapped in the dark," he says. "I was alone, and my instinct was to lash out. I was perhaps not entirely an animal, but neither was I myself. I could not reason. There were only feelings—hatred and terror and the desire to destroy."

I start to speak, but he stops me with a gesture. "And you." He looks at me, his lips curving in something that's not quite a smile; it's more and less than that. "I knew little else, but I always knew you."

And when he kisses me, I feel as though I can finally breathe again.



EPILOGUE

My coronation comes a week later, and I am stunned at how many of the low Court rulers, along with subjects of the realms, travel to witness it. Interestingly, many take great pains to bring mortals as their guests, changeling children and human artists and lovers. It’s utterly surreal to see this attempt to curry favor, and it’s gratifying all the same.

Cardan chose three faerie makers to be given places in the household of Elfhame. One is Mother Marrow. The second is an ancient-looking hob who seems to hide behind an enormous and heavily braided beard. I am surprised to find that the third, a mortal smith, corresponded with my human father. When I meet him, Robert of Jersey spends some time admiring Nightfell and tells me a funny story about a conference they both attended a decade before.

Since the makers have settled in, they’ve been busy.

The ceremony begins at nightfall, and we have it under the stars on the new Isle of Insear. Braziers blaze, and the sky is thick with sea spray and incense. The ground beneath us is moon-blooming phlox.

I am in a gown of deep forest green with crow feathers covering the shoulders and sleeves, while Cardan wears a doublet ornamented with bright beetle wings. Baphen, in one of his long blue robes—with many celestial ornaments in his beard—will conduct the ceremony.

Oak is outfitted in white with gold buttons. Taryn kisses him on the forehead, for courage, since he will have to put the crowns on both of our heads.

“Long has the Greenbriar tradition been held in the High Court,” Baphen begins. “Blood crowns blood. And while the crown is gone and vows of obedience with it, we will yet follow tradition. And so, High King, accept your new crown from Oak, your blood and your heir.”

Oak looks unhappy about being called the heir, but he takes the crown from the pillow, a circlet of rich gold with nine points in the shape of leaves around the band. Being High King, Cardan isn’t supposed to kneel to anyone, so Vivienne lifts Oak. With a laugh, my brother places a new crown on Cardan’s head to the delight of the crowd.

“Folk of Elfhame,” Baphen says, using the ritual words that Cardan never received before, rushed as our last ceremony was. “Will you accept Cardan of the Greenbriar line as your High King?”

The chorus goes up. “We will.”

Then it’s my turn. “It is uncommon for any Court to have two rulers. Yet you, Jude Duarte, High Queen, have shown us why it can be a strength instead of a weakness. When the High Court was threatened, you stood against our enemies and broke the spell that might have destroyed us. Come forward and accept your crown from Oak, your brother and your heir.”

I walk forward, standing as Vivienne swoops my brother back into her arms. He plops the crown on my head. It is a twin to Cardan’s, and I am surprised by the weight of it.

“Folk of Elfhame,” he says. “Will you accept Jude Duarte as your High Queen?”

For a moment, in the silence, I believe that they will renounce me, but the ritual words come from their many mouths. “We will.”

I grin irrepressibly at Cardan. He smiles back, with a little surprise. It’s possible I don’t smile like that very often.

Cardan turns to the crowd before us. “Now we have boons to distribute and betrayals to reward. First the boons.”

He signals toward a servant, who brings forth Madoc’s sword, the one that split the throne of Elfhame.

“To Grima Mog, our Grand General,” he says. “You shall have Grimsen’s final work and wear it for so long as you should remain in our service.”

She receives it with a bow and a clasped hand to her heart.

He continues. “Taryn Duarte, our tribunal was never formally concluded. But consider it concluded now, in your favor. The Court of Elfhame has no quarrel with you. We grant all of Locke’s estates and land to you and your child.”

There are murmurs at that. Taryn comes forward to make a low curtsy.

“Last,” he says. “We would like our three friends from the Court of Shadows to step forward.”

The Ghost, the Bomb, and the Roach walk onto the carpet of white flowers. They are shrouded in cloaks that cover them from head to toe, even covering their faces with thin black netting.

Cardan beckons, and pages come forward, carrying pillows. On each is a silver mask, denoting nothing of gender, just a gently blank metal face with something slightly impish about the curve of the mouth.

“You who dwell in shadows, I wish for you to stand with us sometimes in the light,” says Cardan. “To each, I give a mask. When you wear it, no one will be able to recall your height or the timbre of your voice. And in that mask, let no one in Elfhame turn you away. Every hearth will be open to you, including mine.”

They bow and lift the masks to their faces. When they do, there’s a sort of distortion around them.

“You are kind, my king,” says one, and even I, who know them, cannot tell which is speaking. But what no mask can hide is how, once they give their bows and depart, one masked figure takes another’s gloved hand.

Or how the third turns his shiny metal face toward Taryn.

Then it’s my turn to step forward. My stomach flutters with nerves. Cardan insisted that I be the one to pass judgment on the prisoners. *You won the day*, he told me, *and the lion’s share of the hard work along with it. You choose their fate.*

Whatever punishment I see fit, from execution to exile to a curse, will be considered just—the more so if it’s witty.

“We will see the petitioners now,” I say. Oak has moved to one side and stands between Taryn and Oriana.

Two knights come forward and kneel. One speaks first. “I have been tasked to plead for all those whose story is as mine. Once we were part of the army of Elfhame, but we knowingly went with General Madoc to the North when our vows were lifted. We betrayed the High King and—” Here he stumbles. “We sought to end his reign. We were wrong. We wish to atone and to prove we can and will be loyal from this day forward.”

Then the second speaks. “I have been tasked to plead for all those whose story is as mine. Once we were part of the army of Elfhame and we knowingly went with General Madoc to the North when our vows were lifted. We betrayed the High King and sought to end his reign. We have no wish to atone. We followed our commander faithfully, and though we will be punished, still we would not have chosen otherwise.”

I glance again at the crowd, at the denizens of Elfhame who fought and bled, at those who sorrowed for lost lives—lives that might have stretched on through centuries if they hadn’t been cut down. I take a breath.

“It is the parlance of the High Court that the soldiers are called falcons,” I say, and am surprised by the steadiness of my voice. “For those who do not wish to atone, become falcons in earnest. Fly through the skies and hunt to your heart’s content. But you will not have your own true form back until such time as you hurt no living thing for the space of a full year and a day.”

“But how will we eat if we can hurt nothing?” asks the knight.

“The kindness of others will have to sustain you,” I say, my voice as cold as I can make it. “To those who would atone, we will accept your vow of loyalty and love. You will be once again part of the High Court. But you will be marked by your betrayal. Let your hands always be red, as though stained with the blood you hoped to shed.”

Cardan gives me an encouraging smile. Randalin looks annoyed that only I am making pronouncements. He clears his throat, but he dares not actually interrupt me.

The next petitioner is Lady Nore from the Court of Teeth. Queen Suren trails behind her. Suren’s crown is still sewn to her head, and while no leash binds her, the hole in her wrist is still there, the skin around it still raw.

I call for a servant to come forward with the bridle, still unused.

“We would have followed you,” says Lady Nore, going down on one knee. “We made you an offer, and it was you who rejected it. Let us return to the North. Have we not been punished enough?”

“Lord Jarel tried to trick me into bondage. Did you know of it?” I ask, indicating the bridle.

Since she cannot lie, she does not speak.

“And you?” I ask Suren.

The girl gives a frightening, savage little laugh. “I know all the secrets they think they hide away.” Her voice is thin and rough, as from disuse.

There’s a tug on my sleeve, and I am surprised to find Oak beside me. He signals for me to bend down and let him whisper in my ear. Randalin’s frown deepens when I do.

“Remember when you said we couldn’t help her,” he reminds me. “We can help her now.”

I pull back, looking at him eye to eye. “So you want to intercede for Queen Suren?”

“I do,” he says.

I send him back to Oriana, slightly more optimistic that he will one day want to sit on the throne of Faerie. “My brother has asked for leniency. Queen Suren, will you swear your loyalty to the crown?”

She glances at Lady Nore as if looking for permission. Lady Nore nods.

“I am yours, High Queen,” the girl says. Her gaze shifts. “And High King.”

I turn to Lady Nore. “I would like to hear you make a vow of loyalty to your queen.”

Lady Nore looks startled. “Of course I give you my fealty—”

I shake my head. “No, I want you to give it to *her*. Your queen. The Queen of the Court of Teeth.”

“Suren?” Her eyes dart around as though looking for an escape. For the first time since coming before me, Lady Nore appears afraid.

“Yes,” I say. “Swear to her. She is your queen, is she not? You can either make your vow or you can wear the golden bridle yourself.”

Lady Nore grits her teeth, then mutters the words. Still, she gets them out. Queen Suren’s expression becomes strange, remote.

“Good,” I say. “The High Court will keep the bridle and hope it never needs to be used. Queen Suren, because my brother interceded for you, I send you on your way with no punishment but this—the Court of Teeth will be no more.”

Lady Nore gasps.

I go on. “Your lands belong to the High Court, your titles are abolished, and your strongholds will be seized. And should you, Nore, attempt to defy this command, remember that it will be Suren, to whom you swore, that punishes you in whatever way she sees fit. Now go forth and be grateful for Oak’s intercession.”

Suren, no longer a queen, smiles in a way that’s not friendly at all, and I notice that her teeth have been filed into small points. Their tips are stained a disturbing red. I consider for the first time that perhaps Suren was being restrained for fear of what she might do if she were not.

The last penitent brought forth is Madoc. His wrists and ankles are bound in a heavy metal that, from the pain in his face, I worry has iron in it.

He does not kneel. Nor does he beg. He only looks from one of us to the other, and then his gaze moves to Oak and Oriana. I see a muscle in his jaw move, but no more than that.

I try to speak, but I feel as though my throat has closed up.

"Have you nothing to say?" Cardan asks him. "You had so much before."

Madoc tilts his head toward me. "I surrendered on the battlefield. What more is there? The war is over, and I have lost."

"Would you go to your execution so stoically?" I ask. From nearby, I hear Oriana's gasp.

But Madoc remains grim. Resigned. "I raised you to be uncompromising. I ask only for a good death. Quick, out of the love that we had for each other. And know that I bear you no grudge."

Since the battle ended, I have known I would be called upon to pass judgment on him. I have turned over the question of punishment in my mind, thinking not just of his army and his challenge, not just of our duel in the snow, but of the old crime, the one that has forever been between us. Do I owe him revenge for the murder of my parents? Is that a debt that must be paid? Madoc would understand that, would understand that love could not stand before duty.

But I wonder if what I owe to my parents is a more flexible view of love and duty, one that they themselves might have embraced. "I told you once that I am what you made me, but I am not only that. You raised me to be uncompromising, yet I learned mercy. And I will give you something like mercy if you can show me that you deserve it."

His gaze comes to mine in surprise and a little wariness.

"Sire," puts in Randalin, clearly exasperated by my handing down every final decision. "Surely you have something to say about all—"

"Silence," says Cardan, his manner utterly changed, his tongue a lash. He looks at Randalin as though the next sentence might be passed on the Minister of Keys. Then he nods to me. "Jude was just getting to the interesting bit."

I don't take my gaze off Madoc. "First, you will swear to forget the name that you know. You will put it from your mind, and it will never again fall from your lips or fingers."

"Would you like to hear it first?" he asks, the faintest smile at the edges of his lips.

“I would not.” This doesn’t seem the place to tell him I know it already. “Second, you must give us your vow of loyalty and obedience,” I say. “And third, you must do both of those things without hearing the sentence for your crimes, which I will nonetheless bestow on you.”

I can see him wrestling with his dignity. A part of him wants to be like the soldiers who denied the desire for atonement. A part of him would like to go to his grave with his back straight and his jaw set. Then there’s a part of him that doesn’t want to go to a grave at all.

“I want mercy,” he says finally. “Or, as you said, something like it.”

I take a deep breath. “I sentence you to live out the rest of your days in the mortal world and to never put your hand on a weapon again.”

He presses his mouth into a thin line. Then he bows his head. “Yes, my queen.”

“Good-bye, Father,” I whisper as he is led away. I say it softly, and I do not think he hears me.

After the coronation, Taryn and I decide to accompany Vivi and Oak, who are heading back to the mortal world. Now that the war is over, Oak could return to Faerie and go to the palace school just as Taryn and I did. But he wants to live a little longer among humans, not just because he’s been there for the better part of the last year, but because Oriana has decided to move with Madoc—and Oak misses his parents.

Vivi has been back and forth for the last week, going on dates with Heather, to whom she’s just reintroduced herself. But now that she’s leaving for good, she gathers up rose hip jams, spider-silk jackets, and other things she wishes to take back from Faerie. As she does, she speculates about all the aspects of the mortal world she’s going to have to explain to Dad. “Like cell phones,” she says. “Or self-checkout in the grocery store. Oh, this is going to be amazing. Seriously, his exile is the best present you ever got me.”

“You know that he’s going to be so bored that he’s going to try to micromanage your life,” Taryn says. “Or plan your invasion of a neighboring apartment building.”

At that, Vivi stops smiling.

It makes Oak giggle, though.

Taryn and I help Vivi pack four saddlebags of stuff, even though Vivi has planted plenty of ragwort in the woods near her apartment building and can return for more supplies anytime she wants. Grima Mog gives Vivi a list of things she'd like sent back to Elfhame, which appears to be mostly instant coffee and hot sauce.

What I don't expect is that Cardan offers to journey with us.

"You should absolutely come," says Taryn. "We can throw a party. You two got married, and no one did anything to celebrate."

I am incredulous. "Oh, we're fine. We don't need any—"

"It's settled, then," Vivi says, forever my older sister. "I bet Cardan has never even tried pizza."

Oak looks scandalized by this pronouncement and starts explaining about different toppings, from pineapple to sausage to anchovies. We're not even in the mortal world and already I am filled with dread. Most likely, Cardan will hate it, and the only question is whether he's going to be awful about it.

Before I can think of a way to dissuade him, we're loading the saddlebags onto ragwort steeds. Then we're flying over the water. Before long, we touch down in a patch of grass near the complex, but not so close to the apartment that Vivi's neighbors are likely to recognize her.

I climb off and take note of the dullness of the grass and the scent of car exhaust in the air. I look over at Cardan warily, worried he will be wrinkling his nose, but he appears merely curious, his gaze going to the lit windows and then toward the roar of the nearby highway.

"It's early," says Vivi. "And the pizza place is close enough to walk." She looks us over. "We should go to the apartment and change first, though."

I guess I can see what she means. Cardan looks as though he just stepped off the stage at a playhouse, and while he can glamour himself, I am not at all sure he knows what it is he's supposed to wear in the illusion.

Vivi lets us into the apartment and puts on a pot of coffee, adding cinnamon to the grounds. Oak goes in the back and gets some kind of electronic game, immediately immersing himself in it on the couch while we sort out clothes.

Cardan's tight pants and boots are passable, and he finds a T-shirt a human friend left there that fits him well enough to wear instead of his fancy doublet. I borrow a dress from Vivi that's loose on her. It's a lot less loose on me.

"I told Heather about you guys," Vivi says. "I am going to call her and see if she can come over and bring some supplies. You can meet her—*again*. And Oak will show you the way to the pizza place."

Taking my hand with a laugh, my little brother starts pulling Cardan and me down the stairs. Vivi chases after us to give me some money. “This is your cash. From Bryern.”

“What did you do?” Cardan asks.

“Beat Grima Mog in a duel,” I say.

He looks at me incredulously. “He ought to have paid you in gold.”

That makes me grin as we walk along the sidewalk. Cardan doesn’t appear to be at all discomfited, whistling a tune and goggling a bit at the humans we pass. I hold my breath, but he doesn’t curse them with a tail to match his own or tempt them with everapple or do anything else that a wicked faerie king might.

We go into the pizza place, where Oak orders three extremely large pies covered with a bizarre array of toppings that I am almost entirely sure no one has ever let him order before: half meatball and half prawn, garlic and tomatoes, goat cheese and black olives, and mushroom and bacon.

When we return to the apartment with our stack of steaming cardboard boxes, Heather and Vivi have tied up a silvery banner that reads CONGRATULATIONS, NEWLYWEDS! in bright colors. Under it, on the kitchen table, is an ice-cream cake with scattered gummy snakes on it and several bottles of wine.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” I say, going over to Heather and giving her a hug. “I just know I’m going to love you.”

“She’s told me some wild things about you all,” Heather says.

Vivi blows a noisemaker. “Here,” she says, passing out paper crowns for us to wear.

“This is ridiculous,” I complain, but put mine on.

Cardan looks at his reflection in the door of the microwave and adjusts his crown so it’s at an angle.

I roll my eyes, and he gives me a quick grin. And my heart hurts a little because we are all together and safe, and it wasn’t something I’d known how to want. And Cardan looks a little shy in the face of all this happiness, as unused to it as I am. There will be struggles to come, I am certain, but right now I am equally sure we will find our way through them.

Vivi opens pizza boxes and uncorks a bottle of wine. Oak takes out a slice of the prawn pizza and digs in.

I raise a plastic glass. “To family.”

“And Faerieland,” says Taryn, raising hers.

“And pizza,” says Oak.

“And stories,” says Heather.

“And new beginnings,” says Vivi.

Cardan smiles, his gaze on me. “And scheming great schemes.”

To family and Faerieland and pizza and stories and new beginnings and scheming great schemes. I can toast to that.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Finishing this book would have been immensely difficult without the support, help, criticism, and thematic derring-do of Sarah Rees Brennan, Leigh Bardugo, Steve Berman, Cassandra Clare, Maureen Johnson, Joshua Lewis, Kelly Link, and Robin Wasserman. Thank you, my roguish crew!

Thank you to all the readers who came out to see me on the road, wrote messages, drew Folk of the Air art, and/or dressed up as the characters. Every bit of it meant more to me than I can say.

A massive thank-you to everyone at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers for supporting my weird vision. Thanks especially to my amazing editor, Alvina Ling, and to Ruqayyah Daud, Siena Koncsol, Victoria Stapleton, Bill Grace, Emilie Polster, Natali Cavanagh, and Valerie Wong, among others. And in the UK, thank you to Hot Key Books, particularly Jane Harris, Emma Matthewson, Roisin O'Shea, and Tina Mories.

Thank you to Joanna Volpe, Hilary Pecheone, Pouya Shahbazian, Jordan Hill, Abigail Donoghue, and everyone at New Leaf Literary for making hard things easier.

Thank you to Kathleen Jennings for her wonderful and evocative illustrations.

And thanks most of all to my husband, Theo, for helping me figure out the stories I want to tell, and to our son, Sebastian, for reminding me that sometimes the most important thing to do is play.

Thank you for choosing a Hot Key book.

If you want to know more about our authors and what we publish, you can find us online.

You can start at our website

www.hotkeybooks.com

And you can also find us on:

We hope to see you soon!

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.hotkeybooks.com

Copyright © Holly Black, 2019
Illustrations by Kathleen Jennings

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Holly Black to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

'Elfin Song' by Edmund Clarence Stedman, first published in 1860 'A Fairy Tale' by Philip James Bailey, first published in 1855

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0757-4

Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk